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Cover painting by Arnold Kohn, illustrating a
 scene from "We Dance for the Dom"

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CITY OF THE DEAD

By G. M. Martin

They called Launn a city of the dead. Its Martian peoples lay frozen in their tracks. But were they really dead—or only asleep?

Paper of Research Prepared by
Professor John Granger
Weston Scientific Foundation
New York, N. Y.
August 11, 2024

Having recently returned from that barren section of Mars, called the Plain of Parna, I wish to report that the City of Launn actually exists. Scientists of this foundation have long believed that at one time the Plain of Parna, now desolate wasteland was inhabited, and irrigated to produce vast riches to support a city far ahead, in every cultural sense, of any earth settlement.

Sparse news of Launn can be gathered on Mars itself. As this planet has once more reverted to the rugged, mining and pioneer country that our own west resembled at one time, the people chuckle at the mere thought that Launn existed or that Mars has ever been anything but a rough, uncomfortable place to live.

Not discouraged at the unfriendly attitude encountered in Martian settlements, I left the last outpost, Fitzroy, on the edge of the Plain of Parna, July seventh, 2023. I was alone, and in trying to navigate over the Plain in a small space ship supplied for me by the foundation, I soon learned that the terrific heat caused updrafts above the desert that made space navigation impossible. I was forced to return to Fitz-

roy and solicit the assistance of a Burtell* caravan master, who after many weeks, managed to come within sight of Launn. It was then that I learned that other Martians had seen Launn, but refused to help me as they feared the strange city of dead.

While the caravan master waited for a week at the edge of the city, I carried on alone. I have proven that this city is inhabited by a race of *dead* people. Men and women who, for some strange reason, were suddenly petrified in the very midst of their activity. I found men in the act of cutting hair, stopped in action, their clippers halted in mid-air.

I found shopkeepers, women at the city fountain, everyone in fact, smiling and robust in appearance, but solid as stone and standing as they must have stood when some strange force rooted them to the spot.

Launn, I have deduced, was not only centuries ahead of all other Martian civilization, but had machines and culture vastly improved on our own.

It is my fondest dream to return to Launn with proper materials, and attempt to bring the people of this city to life. To study them and determine what changes can be made to better our own living by copying

*Burtell - Martian desert burro



Granger couldn't make up his mind whether to be alarmed or amused by the appearance and actions of the insect men

the citizens of this long dead city.

I am prepared...

AUTHOR'S NOTE— This account covered a total of five hundred pages, and dealt in detail with every phase of life (or death) in Launn. It was read on August 22, to the members of the Weston Research Foundation.

Charles Weston, a stern faced man, his almost bald scalp shining under the light of the lamps above the long table, cleared his throat.

"Gentlemen," he addressed the distinguished group seated on either side of the table. "You have heard John Granger's report. May I, as the leader of this foundation, offer a few words?"

It was obvious from the look of determination on his face that no one could stop him. No one tried.

"Granger is ill at present. He could not be at this meeting and the report has been read by the secretary of the foundation. It is a most interesting report, if rather long winded..."

A few men chuckled softly at this point.

"Granger is ill, as I mentioned before. His—mind—isn't quite as clear as it was when he joined our ranks several years ago.

His meaning was obvious. Some of the foundation's members smiled. Others, friends of Granger, didn't look happy.

"Granger tells us that we can gain a cultural heritage from Launn, *if* in some expensive and far fetched manner, we can restore life to a race of dead people that we are not even sure exist.

"Weston Foundation spends its money only on sound research, where the benefits gained can be given direct to Americans to better

their living. For this reason, I vote against anything that sounds as vague as Granger's suggestion. I do not care to spend millions pursuing a will-o-the wisp which probably exists only in Granger's mind."

He sat down rather heavily, lighted a new cigar and waited for suggestions. Near the far end of the table a tall, rather gaunt looking man stood up. Weston nodded at him.

"What have you to say, Jordon?"

Phillip Jordon smiled. It made him look like a grinning death head with nothing but skin to cover the bones of his ugly face.

"I'm with you, Weston," he said. "But I'll go a step farther. Granger is washed up. He's too old and he's a dreamer. Not aggressive enough for the foundation's purpose. I propose that he be asked to retire and give up his position here."

A stir of unrest in the room caused men to whisper among themselves. Someone said, without arising.

"Granger didn't cut in on your field at Fitzroy, did he Phillip?"

PHILLIP JORDON reddened. Weston was on his feet, and his heavy fist crashed down on the table.

"Just a moment," he said loudly. "Phillip Jordon is a member of good standing here. It was long ago proven that he has no connection with Sulphana Inc. Why do you men persist...?"

The man who had challenged Jordon stood up. His name was Weaks, and he was one of the few Granger supporters left in the room.

"Because," he said, "Jordon has been seen in and out of Sulphana for years. Sulphana gets its product from an undetermined location near

Fitzroy, Mars. I have cancelled checks proving that Jordon received regular payments from Sulphana and now he is very anxious to keep Granger from going back to Fitzroy. It fits, that's all. I see it that way, and I'll send in my resignation tomorrow. Good day, gentlemen."

He pushed his chair back and left the room.

The room was very quiet, save for Weston's labored breathing. Few men dared insult him in this manner. He owned and operated the largest research group in America.

"Weston owns America's brains," was the saying of the nation.

"Are there any more who wish to walk through that door?" he asked at last. No one moved. No one looked up.

"I accept your suggestion, Jordon," Weston said at length. "Granger will be asked to retire at once."

CHARLES WESTON—President of the organization—said in the NEW YORK CITIZEN:

Granger's report reflects in no way on the Foundation. We do not choose to vouch for the truth of his words, or to deny it. Further study is necessary. Personally, I can say that doubt exists in my mind concerning the full truth of the report.

August 30—NEW YORK CITIZEN: John Granger, the man who visited a dead city, killed his own chances for a fine career with the Weston Research Foundation by resigning abruptly, without explaining his reasons for doing so. It is thought that a statement in this paper by the director of the Foundation, Charles Weston, may have caused ill feelings between these two men.

AUTHOR'S NOTE—Several years passed after Granger dropped back into public life. Then in 2033, a small concern announced its intention to explore the Plain of Parna at its own expense. The organization was listed as Granger and Brandon—Scientific Foundation. An insight into this organization can be gained by the following letter from Lester R. Brandon of Yale College to:

John Granger
144 Ridge Road
Brighton, New York
Dear Mr. Granger:

Our past correspondence has been pleasant, but without direct results. I have studied the Weston case against you with great interest and agree that Phillip Jordon shows undue interest in preventing us from visiting Launn. Jordon has recently been doing business openly with Sulphana Inc. Sulphana's product, I am ready to swear, is not a manufactured one. It has been produced by some animal or plant life, for we find it impossible to break down chemically all the ingredients found in it. Like the ancient sulpha drug, it cures. But it works in cases that one would think impossible to effect a cure. Sulphana will cure and knit a wound in two days. It will actually bring a man back to health when all other medical aids have failed.

It is my belief that our trip to Launn will be two-fold in purpose. I will attempt to assist you in bringing to life the strange race of people you mention. I will also attempt to trace the source of Sulphana. The organization now controlling it holds a monopoly, and is robbing the public with prices beyond all reason. I would like to play a part in bringing Sulphana down to the working

man's reach and at the same time join with you in an attempt to save Launn.

I realize that officially your standing is bad. Weston ruined you. That makes no difference to me. I'm young and have no reputation. This trip may make me great. It cannot harm me, for there is no reputation to harm.

Cordially,
Les Brandon

This was followed by another letter on September 4 of the same year, also to:

John Granger
144 Ridge Road
Brighton, New York

Dear John:

The plans are complete. I will supply a cook, Mrs. Jenny Hudson, who is a hardy soul and a clever person with a menu. Her husband, who for some years has done janitor work here at the college, is the very man for the hardwork of the organization. PeeWee Hudson we call him, and he's well over six feet tall, hard as nails and clever with his fists.

I'm delighted to hear that your wife wishes to accompany us. I'm sure from your description that she's a very pleasant person, and will add to the success of the venture.

I'll meet you at Fitzroy, Mars, in October. The worst of the heat will be gone from the Plain of Parna by then. I plan to ship the desert car from New York this month and go along as space cargo to see the car safely to Fitzroy.

Your friend,
Les Brandon

* * *

THE SLIM freight-bubble flashed over the twisting sands of the

Plain of Parna, sending up a roll of dust in its wake. Inside the swift utility car, five people sat in various stages of exhaustion. PeeWee Hudson's wife, Jenny, was the worst. Jenny, fat and covered with perspiration, had grumbled ever since the freight-bubble left Fitzroy, the last Martian outpost on the edge of the Plain of Parna.

PeeWee Hudson had ignored his wife thus far, but his huge face was red with humiliation for her actions. If Jenny troubled him with her constant nagging, the others in the car were secretly amused at the whole affair.

John Granger smiled as he guided the car ahead, his hands gripping the steering levers.

"Hold out a half hour longer," he said. "We'll be close to Launn by then. It will be cooler near the mountains."

Jenny sniffed.

"I said it once and I'll say it again, John Granger. I don't approve of this visiting dead people. It ain't..."

PeeWee Hudson's mouth opened slowly.

"Aww! Jenny, why don't you keep quiet. You're just fretting."

Jenny's jaws snapped together with an audible click.

"Don't you tell me to shut up, PeeWee Hudson," she resumed. "I'll..."

"Hold it, Jenny," the young man sitting behind the map-desk said. "There isn't room in here for a free for all. Wait until we reach Launn. We'll rope off a ring and you and your husband can fight it out."

Jenny Hudson gave Les Brandon one of those, 'Now see here young man' looks, and remained silent. Brandon studied his maps for a moment and then looked up again.

"Ten minutes will end the journey, John, if my figures check. Give me the readings once more, will you?"

John Granger turned momentarily to his young flaxen-haired Eve who sat beside him.

"Give our most excellent assistant the necessary data, will you, Eve?"

Eve Granger laughed.

"I guess that will silence you, master-mind Brandon," she called back to the man at the map-desk. "Relax, will you. Don't be so darned formal out here on the desert."

Brandon smiled and consulted his maps once more. Eve Granger frowned upon receiving no reply, then started to read the instruments on the control board.

"Speed—450—time out of Fitzroy—5 hours—time to Launn—estimated twenty minutes—"

"Check," Brandon said. "Thank you, Mrs. Granger."

She turned half around in her seat and said with a smile, "Eve, to my friends."

Brandon tried to smile, failed miserably and went back to his work.

THE HEAT was increasing. The low built, speedy car hurtled ahead, its rubber treads flashing under it, bouncing into the air now and then, to hit fifteen or twenty yards further ahead and gather speed once more.

Within, triple shock absorbers killed the vibration. The car was a traveling fortress, filled with scientific materials, food supplies and light armaments. There remained just room to accommodate its five occupants, officially entered on the Fitzroy records as the Granger Exploration Party.

Ahead of them now, under the purple shadows of the Mountain of

Spawn, a city was springing out of the desert. Bits of it seemed to arise and take shape in the misty shadows of later afternoon. Gradually the people in the exploration car grew quiet. Les Brandon looked up from his desk and stared ahead, over Eve Granger's golden head at the city. Jenny forgot to quarrel with her husband and John Granger gripped the levers more tightly and fought with the rocket motors to get just a little more speed.

This was Launn, City of the Dead.

This was the center of a vast civilization in an arid desert country where people supposedly did not exist. Abruptly the desert ceased and the first towers of Launn rose abruptly toward the sky. They were slim and cylindrical, made of the daintiest crystal, yet designed never to fall. Launn was laid out in a vast circle beneath the forboding crags of the Mount of Spawn. It nestled there on the edge of the Plain of Parna, like a huge, delicately cut jewel, lovely as a diamond yet nestled in a setting of dust and grim shadows.

John Granger was the first to speak.

"I have come back to Launn," he said softly. "I said ten years ago that I would return. I made that promise to the Prince. I wonder," his voice was strangely choked with emotion, "if there is still time?"

He had married Eve, ten years his junior, when he returned from his first pilgrimage to Launn. Brandon was a good man, but he had been in high school then. PeeWee Hudson and his wife were almost strangers to Granger. PeeWee had been added for his brawn and Jenny because she cooked food that no expedition could afford to be without.

"John," Eve Granger's voice was

a trifle awed, "those towers and the low, beautifully designed buildings below them? They are full of the dead?"

Granger nodded.

"Dead? Yes, according to our standards. Stiff yet natural, like frozen marble. I wonder if they are actually dead?"

"We'll pray that they aren't, Professor," Brandon said suddenly. His voice, cool, businesslike, startled the dreamlike atmosphere of the conversation. "The melform injections may do the trick."

His eyes were bright. His voice, untouched by the spell of magic felt by the others, sounded mechanical and like a college student reciting a lesson. There wasn't a bit of romance in Brandon, Eve Granger thought, and it made her resent him strangely. Brandon was miscast in this dream world. Brandon was—too—well—too darn down to earth. She shivered, letting the twisting, reeling shadows and the purple mists catch hold of her soul. This was a wonderful place. A land of dreams and of death.

"I suggest that we avoid the city tonight," Brandon said, his words clipped and professional.

John Granger nodded.

"Memories urge me to rush in at once to revisit the palace," he said. "Yet I know you're right. There have been changes. It might not be safe. We'll establish camp close to the walls and go in when morning brings better light."

EVE GRANGER turned hurriedly in her seat, disappointment clouding her pretty face.

"Oh—Les." She looked at Brandon. "There you go again. Always scientific and practical. How can you resist those lovely towers? I

should think you'd want to see for yourself all the wonderful things John has been telling about all these years. Why don't you get your nose away from the desk and be human for a little while?"

PeeWee Hudson grunted a little, his only form of protest. He dared not speak aloud before Jenny, but he agreed with Brandon. Eve Granger picked on Brandon most of the time. Brandon was all right. He was a whizz at medical science, and plenty cool. Plenty, PeeWee thought. Why didn't the Granger dame keep her pretty mouth shut?

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Granger," Brandon said. "Your husband mentioned the insect people who caused him trouble during his last trip here. I wouldn't let the spell of the city catch me off guard if I were you. It might be well to be cautious."

The girl had turned around once more, her face red as she stared straight ahead.

Brandon studied the back of her head for a minute, then returned to his papers. The car halted.

John Granger climbed wearily from behind the control panel.

"You and PeeWee set up camp," he said. "Eve and I will go a bit closer to Launn and have a look around. Eve is quite anxious to see the place."

"I wouldn't suggest..."

"We didn't ask for suggestions," Eve Granger snapped. She followed her husband down the small ladder to the desert floor. "Set up the tents, Les. That's your style. Be sure your netting is snug tonight. A little green insect man might creep in and pinch you on the leg."

They waited until John Granger and his wife were some distance away. Then PeeWee Hudson lumbered down the stairs and started to

open the freight compartment. He was busy pulling out the carefully rolled silken tents when Brandon descended the stairs, stretched and stared after John and Eve Granger, tiny specks against the horizon.

"Never mind that broad," PeeWee said in a voice filled with disgust. "She ain't got brains enough to come in outa the wet. You're okay, Mr. Brandon. What you said was right."

Brandon turned absently and gave him a hand with the tent poles.

"I'm not so sure that I am," he said mildly. "You know, Mrs. Granger has real spirit. I admire spirit."

"Jeez," Hudson said. "Jeez, but you can take an awful lickin' and come back for more."

"It's a pity you can't be polite to women, PeeWee Hudson." PeeWee ducked instinctively as Jenny came toward them. "Now rattle your bones around and get that camp stove set up. We're all too hungry to listen to your tongue rattle."

PeeWee Hudson winked at Brandon.

"You see what I mean," he said in a low voice. "Women are a lot alike."

"What's that?" Jenny Hudson's ears were tuned to just such conversational undertones.

PeeWee straightened up, carrying the stove, and went toward her with it.

"I said women are all right," PeeWee said. "Say Jenny, you gonna give us some more of that Fitzroy special tonight? That's the best bread I ever did eat."

Jenny sniffed.

"You're kiddin' again, PeeWee," she said, but it was evident that she was pleased. "You go out there and make sure the Professor is all..."

"BONG"

THE CLEAR, deep notes of a bell silenced her abruptly. The three of them pivoted as one toward the rapidly darkening city of Launn.

"What the heck was that?" PeeWee inquired.

"One of them darned corpses coming to life," Jenny said in an awed voice. "I knew we shouldn't..."

"BONG"

The sound came again, the distant pealing of a great bell, vibrating against the thin air.

Brandon dropped the tent-roll which he had started to assemble.

"Get the fire pistols," he shouted. "I'll bring the rifles from the cabin. Jenny, you stay with the car and keep the fire gun ready. We may need you."

Brandon's voice was urgent and filled with something more compelling than fear. Without a word, Jenny and PeeWee Hudson made their way swiftly to the car. Hudson came out with two small, wicked looking pistols. He caught up with Brandon who was already on his way across the sands.

"What you figure is wrong?"

Hudson ran as fast as his heavy body would allow. He had to struggle to keep up with Brandon who moved swiftly, easily, in long, running strides.

"The green men Granger told us about," Brandon snapped. "Jenny was wrong about the dead ones. They can't harm us. It's the living we must worry about."

They reached the outskirts of Launn and because he had heard long detailed accounts of the city from John Granger's lips, Brandon knew where he was going. Low, colorful buildings closed in about them. Empty doorways, empty streets, silent, tomb-like places swallowed them up.

"Where was the bell?"

PeeWee Hudson was beginning to get his wind. Away from Jenny, his courage arose.

"From the palace, I think," Brandon said. "John and Mrs. Granger must have gone there in spite of my advice. They've met the insect men. God alone knows..."

He stopped trying to talk, and conserved his breath. The city was a wonderful place, but he had no time to notice it now. He was aware only that the gong had rung twice and was now silent. That he and PeeWee Hudson had to save their friends from death.

He had heard about the gong.

"If a visitor dares enter Launn and does not return, the gong sounds," John Granger had told him years ago. "After the gong sounds, it is but a matter of time before the body is found. Launn is a beautiful place, haunted with grim, stalking death."

Damn Eve Granger, Brandon thought. If her anxiety to see Launn tonight had resulted in her husband's death, the exploration would be useless. Women, in young Brandon's estimation, were thick headed, lovely fools.

THE PALACE was close to the outskirts of the city. Brandon had it in his mind as clearly as though he had been here a hundred times. Even as he saw it, he remembered Granger's first description, and could not change a word of it. His feet pounded up the wide marble stairs. He heard PeeWee Hudson close behind.

"A palace beyond description with great beauty and unity of design," Granger had said. "Built low to the ground, with crystal spires rising from its many terraces. Spires that point upward until you fear they

might pierce the sky. The terraces were barren of life, but shimmering under the radiance of millions of strange jewels set into the floors and the walls. The palace of Launn is a wonderful place."

Those had been Granger's words, and Brandon thought as he charged across the first terrace, that this was not wonderful, but a treacherous, death-filled morgue.

He hardly noticed the two silent guards in blue who stood on each side of the doors as he threw them open. His eyes were focused down the long tapestry hung hall, and at the scene in the throne room beyond.

The insect men of John Granger's memory.

He kept on running, the fire pistol in one hand, the powerful fire rifle in his other. He heard Hudson swear loudly behind him.

At the entrance of the throne room, Brandon stopped short, his eyes wide with amazement.

The room was huge, a crystal ceiling shimmering high above in the pale light. In the center of the great room, seated on a high throne, was the dead Prince of Launn, blond headed, garbed in a rich, crimson robe, his clear eyes staring over the mob below him. Staring into infinity—into the land beyond life.

John and Eve Granger were at his feet, their arms and legs bound with bits of their own clothing.

About them, crawling like a vast horde of huge ants, the insect men of Launn were swarming. Brandon's eyes swept the scene hurriedly, desperately, yet the details were so terrible that he remembered them forever after.

The insect men were three feet long, and their faces, yellow and beaked, looked strangely human. Be-

yond that, all resemblance to human beings ended abruptly. Their bodies were an unhealthy green and their forearms were jointed and hinged like the arms of a lobster. Their bodies were fat and puffy and they propelled themselves by four hind feet that kicked spasmodically, sending them scuttling along at a tremendous speed. The floor was covered with a green slimy substance that seemed to come from them as they scurried along the floor.

Brandon saw two insect men dart in and nip at Granger with the long forearms.

He charged in among them, tossing aside the fire pistol and pulling back the trigger that opened the full power of the fire rifle.

IT MUST have been the sudden surprise that caught them off guard and sent them scuttling for protection.

Brandon lost all sense of caution. He moved ahead steadily, never giving ground, always with that searing, fire-trail of death cutting ahead of him. He saw three of them start to drag Granger away. Taking a chance at hitting his friend, he managed to kill the creatures. The room was silent now. One or two of the dying insect men tried to rise, and fell again, to roll over with their terrible limbs protruding in the air.

He was at Granger's side, fighting with the knots that held him.

"Thank God," he heard Granger mumble.

Eve's face was very white and as he helped her to her feet, she leaned against him heavily.

"You'll be all right," he said.

She was crying hysterically. Her husband came to her.

"We've got to get out of here before they return," he said, and they

started unsteadily for the door. PeeWee Hudson followed, still swearing loudly at the dead and dying he left behind. The throne room was a shambles. As Brandon hurried after his friends, he took one last look at the dead Prince.

The Prince was as he had first seen him, serene and calm in death.

BRANDON led the way back to the camp. Eve Granger refused to speak to him again. Brandon knew how she and her husband felt. They had entered the city against their own better judgment. That they were still alive was due to better luck than either of them deserved.

"I'll admit as much," Granger said when they were once more near their own fire and under the protection of the heavy gun mounted in the car. "Eve and I were fools. We ventured too far into the city. They attacked us in the streets and carried us to the palace. Admit, Eve, that Les was no cream puff. He saved our lives."

Eve Granger didn't answer. She turned away from the group, back toward the city.

Granger hesitated, then embarrassed at her behaviour, cleared his throat and went on talking.

"Good job, Brandon. The insect men know I'm back and they know why. For that reason, they're hostile toward me, though I've never harmed any of them before. From now on, it will be a battle of the death."

Dinner was consumed and the fire died out. Jenny Hudson basked in the glory of having produced a good meal and PeeWee fell asleep under the car.

For a long time after the others were asleep, Brandon stood on the desert, staring at the strange city of Launn. Something stirred within

him that he could not explain. Why had Eve refused to be his friend? It had never mattered much to him what any woman said or thought. Yet, tonight he was vaguely distressed by her attitude. He decided that she was just another bull-headed member of her ungrateful sex, and tried to let it go at that. Still, he was worried and could not sleep when at last he tied the netting around his cot and sought rest. He kept remembering her warning of this afternoon.

"Be sure to sleep with your netting tied tightly."

He swore and turned on his back, staring up at the clear, crazy pattern of a strange sky.

Eve Granger, he decided, was getting under his skin.

"I THINK," John Granger said quietly, "that we should tour the city in the desert car. I suggest that one person remain in the car to cover any side trips we wish to make into the various buildings. In that way, the insect men will be unable to surprise us."

The small party had gathered early, the camp was dismantled and packed away in the car. They were ready for the first official visit to Launn.

"The plan is a good one," Brandon said. "After last night, we face danger at every corner."

Eve Granger who had failed to offer anything to the conversation thus far, suggested a little sarcastically:

"Perhaps you should stay in the car, Mr. Brandon. It may not be safe..."

"Eve," John Granger interrupted almost harshly, "if you can't be civil this morning, I think you'd be better off away from us all. You may drive."

The girl's face flushed crimson, but she didn't reply. She went hurriedly up the ramp and into the navigation room of the vehicle. In five minutes they were entering Launn.

With the coming of daylight, the city was more beautiful than ever. For an hour they cruised up wide colorful streets, across sparkling lagoons and over tower ramps, high above the earth level.

At last Granger asked that the car be halted before a small, compact building constructed of colored bricks.

"Here," he said solemnly, "we will see for the first time what devastating effect the Power had on the people of Launn."

They had long ago learned to speak of it as the Power. No one knew what had happened to the people of Launn. Something had killed them while life was proceeding at a normal pace. The Power had stopped all action suddenly, like a clock that runs down and cannot continue to tick.

They left the car quietly. Brandon was thinking of the handsome Prince of Launn whom he had seen last night. A man caught in the prime of life, sitting on his throne, staring with sightless eyes over the heads of green insects.

John Granger took the lead, opening the door to the building. They crowded into the doorway, Jenny Hudson and her husband, PeeWee, John Granger and Brandon. None of them spoke for a long time. Then Jenny said in a hushed voice:

"Dozens of them. All nice looking, too, and deader than herring."

Granger sighed.

"Dead? We hope not. Perhaps...?"

The room must have been a place of worship. It was large, decorated with huge murals of finest craftsmanship. Delicate crystal windows

allowed the morning light to sift across row upon row of still, intelligent faces. Every person in the room was spotlessly robed in white silk. Every person, and there were hundreds of them, was staring sightlessly at the empty altar near the far end of the room. It was like a huge exhibit in a wax museum, Brandon thought. A perfect reproduction of life frozen in death.

He turned away and his eyes sought Eve Granger, still sitting above them in the cab of the car. She was frowning.

He heard the door close behind him and Granger said:

"All over the city. Barbers, actors on the stage, craftsmen at their work, society people, bathing, reading, living in their homes. The Power caught them all, rich and poor alike. Preserved them thus."

IT WAS close to night once more, and they had seen it all. Seen everything that John Granger had waited and fought to return to for ten long years.

The car halted in a huge park.

"This will be satisfactory," Granger said. "The lagoon will supply water. The turf is clear for a hundred yards in any direction. The insect men can't steal up without being seen."

In an hour they had established camp.

After that, Brandon wandered around by himself, careful to stay within range of the heavy fire guns that PeeWee Hudson kept watch over in the car. Eve Granger was hard at work with Jenny Hudson. They were working over the dinner. John Granger had retired to his maps of the city, where every person in Launn was recorded as a small 'x' on roll after roll of white map paper.

The plan was simple, Brandon thought. Of seven serums he had prepared, they hoped that one would revive the population, or at least part of it. After that, Granger would work methodically until every small 'x' had been erased, until every person in Launn was alive. Then would come the months, perhaps years, of study. The master plan was to take from these people a culture that would be invaluable on earth.

There was no doubt in Brandon's mind that this was a far advanced civilization.

What had caused its death?

In addition to the cultural aspect, Brandon couldn't shake from his mind the stern, compelling face of Phillip Jordon, the man who had fought their plans until the last moment. From Fitzroy, giant liners took valuable Sulphana to earth. Yet, no one knew where it came from. Perhaps from Launn?

He thought that they had not heard the last of Jordon. Jordon was a hard man, and if they came even close to stumbling on to the source of Sulphana, Jordon would be there to protect his interests.

Did the dead people of Launn know the secret of Sulphana? Perhaps. Time would tell. If they did, Jordon must have found it by accident. Launn had been dead for many centuries. How many, no one knew. Brandon shrugged. That would come later. As long as Jordon left them alone, there was other work to be done. He must help Granger first. Help the man regain his position in society and in the great Weston Foundation. That meant more to Granger than a fortune in Sulphana. Meant more than life itself, and Granger was no longer a young man.

Granger's age turned Brandon's thoughts to Eve. Granger's wife was

a young, selfish woman. Granger should never have married her. He, Brandon, had to get his mind off Eve. She wasn't good for him. Wasn't good for any of them.

Above the park, the lofty, black crags of the Mountain of Spawn pushed toward the city. The cliffs seemed to reach out like shadows, closing in upon him. He drew his tunic closer and walked back to the camp. Jenny Hudson was dishing out savory bowls of turtle soup. He forgot for a time the grasping shadows of the mountain.

BUT I'LL swear she was sound asleep at six this morning," Jenny Hudson said. "PeeWee snores, poor thing. I'm not used to sleeping in the same room with him. He woke me up at six and I took a peek through the curtain at Mrs. Granger. She was sound asleep."

John Granger returned from his search of the lagoon. His face was lined with worry. He managed to keep his voice calm.

"Brandon, I'm afraid I'm responsible for Eve's disappearance," he said. "I spoke harshly to her last night. She's not accustomed to this sort of thing. Lived a sheltered life at Brighton. I depended on her to pull out of it in a week or two. She's not a bad sort of girl."

PeeWee took the heavy gun and started toward the desert. He said, "I think you'd better stay with Jenny. I'll try some of the streets near the palace."

It was eight in the morning. Jenny had called Eve Granger at seven. It was then that the search had started. Les Brandon had missed his small bag, the one that contained the injection needles.

He had his own theory of Eve's disappearance. Thus far he had de-

cided not to pass it on to the others.

"I don't feel right about staying here—not helping," Granger said. "I guess Jenny needs me."

"Jenny Hudson can take care of herself," the fat woman said stubbornly. "I'll sit up there near the fire cannon and if any of them darned green bugs show up, I'll blast them into Kingdom-Come."

Granger turned appealingly to Brandon.

Brandon nodded.

"I guess Jenny's right," he said.

Together they started toward the palace.

Brandon had noticed as time went on that Launn started getting under a man's skin. The uncanny silence was disturbing. Here was a great city, perfectly in order, without movement or sound within its limits. Here, behind every door, dead people stood or sat on their jobs, a sit down strike that struck horror to the heart of any man. People had sat for perhaps ten centuries, their bodies in perfect condition, without movement or life. A city suspended in time.

They reached the palace. They went down the great hall toward the throne room.

With the injection case gone, Brandon guessed that Eve Granger might have decided to get revenge of sorts for the manner in which they had treated her.

HE REACHED the court room, to see that the dead Prince was still on his throne. Nothing had been touched.

Then he had been wrong. In guessing at Eve's actions, he assumed that the Prince would be the first person she might try to restore to life. She would, in this manner prove to them that she was not helpless but

was entirely able to become a working member of the group.

Granger watched him circle the throne slowly, then curiosity made him question Brandon.

"You think that Eve would have come here?"

Brandon nodded.

"My injection case was missing," he said. "I didn't tell the others."

Granger thought for some time. Then he nodded.

"That sounds like Eve all right. Headstrong as she is, she may have hoped to steal some of our glory to prove herself fit."

"Evidently not," Brandon said.

He started back toward the outer doors. The palace was silent. The sun, coming in the doors, made strange designs on the rugs.

Halfway to the open doors, he stopped abruptly. Something was wrong with the picture he saw. Something that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He stood still, staring at the rich rugs, the pictures of royalty that that hung on the wall. Then it dawned on him.

"*The blue guards*," he said aloud.

John Granger's eyes widened with amazement.

"The what?"

Brandon started to run toward the door.

"The blue guards," he repeated. "Remember, last night there were two guards, one on each side of the door. They were tall men, dressed in blue. *They're gone*."

They were gone. He found the faint dust prints where they had been standing. The men had disappeared. He stared at Granger.

"Could it have been Eve?"

Granger's face was red with anger.

"The people of Launn have been still for centuries," he said.

"The insect men have made no attempt to molest them. Draw your own conclusions."

BRANDON started to run back toward the car where Jenny Hudson stood guard.

"If Eve really succeeded with the injections," he shouted as he ran, "then more power to her. I hadn't dared hope for success so soon. She will probably return to the car at once."

Granger was panting.

"To laugh at us," he offered. "Yes, that would be Eve's first thought."

They slowed their pace as they reached the park. Jenny Hudson turning the barrel of the big gun on them, was waiting for them to approach. Once they were within hearing distance, Brandon shouted:

"Has Eve returned?"

Jenny shook her head.

"PeeWee came back ten minutes ago," she said. "He met a couple of gents in blue pajamas and had to shoot the daylights out of them. They were going to murder my PeeWee. He's gone toward the palace to meet you. I told him you went that way."

Brandon swore softly.

"If I find that woman," he said grimly under his breath.

John Granger sank to the grass and lowered his gun.

"Pound the living daylights out of her," he suggested. "I would myself, if I was sure I could handle her—and that we'll still find her alive."

Something exploded in the street, far away, in the direction they had come. It sent a strange, colorful rainbow of sparks above the tops of the buildings. It sank down again, and Launn was silent once more.

"PeeWee's found something," Jen-

nie cried excitedly. "He took a Barton* flare with him. Said if he used it to come in a hurry."

Brandon reached the ramp on the car with one long jump. Granger was close behind. Before Granger had time to close the door, Brandon had the rocket jets firing rapidly. The car heaved loose from the soft earth of the park and lunged into the street. They gathered speed, moving rapidly toward the spot where the Barton flare had exploded. Brandon shouted up through the hatch to the gunroom.

"Get that gun ready, Jenny. You may have to shoot your way through to PeeWee."

He heard Jenny chuckle with satisfaction and knew that she would be ready. John Granger was busy breaking out the ammunition for the fire rifles.

EVE GRANGER slipped quietly from the cot and tip-toed through Jenny Hudson's tiny room, into Les Brandon's laboratory. She found the bag of injection needles quickly, opened it to make sure they were all there, then snapped the bag closed again.

With it tightly under her arm she made her way silently out of the car. All was quiet. Launn, asleep, was so quiet in the early morning that it frightened her.

Her instructions were simple.

"Stay with the party until you reach Launn," Phillip Jordon had told her that last night on earth. "Steal Brandon's injection case. He has only one set of needles. Meet me in the palace."

He had leaned close to her then, and with one arm about her waist, said:

**Barton flare—colorful rescue rocket used in Earth Rocket system.*

"Don't be frightened, darling. Your husband cannot harm you. I'll be waiting in a room below the palace. You will be met by insect men. They are my friends and you needn't fear them. They will take you directly to me."

She knew that Phillip had followed her all the way from Fitzroy. He had left a note for her there, hiding it cleverly in her compact when she left it on the table in her room.

"Courage, beloved. A few more days and we will be together."

Eve Granger loved Phillip Jordon. Loved him because he was strong and ugly and so full of cold courage that nothing frightened him. She looked back at the car once as she left the park.

John Granger? Yes, she had cared for him once. Cared for him as a daughter did her father. Now she knew what real love was. Knew the strength in Jordon's arms. The fierce impatience of the man. He wasn't handsome as Brandon was handsome, or kind as Granger. He was an adventurer, fearing nothing. A godless, powerful man. Phillip Jordon was his own god.

She hurried, almost ran, toward the palace. She cursed Brandon for interfering last night. If it were not for Brandon, she would have seen Jordon then.

At the palace she didn't hesitate. She went on into the throne room. Her footsteps were loud against the stone floor, and as it had last night, the sound of her shoes against the stone brought the green insect creatures from their hiding places.

She felt herself grow taut and frightened inside. She stood very still while they moved about her, coming close, but never quite daring to touch her body.

"Phillip," she called. Her voice was loud and it echoed through the chamber. "Phillip."

She heard him answer her.

"Coming—Don't be alarmed."

The fear went out of her and in its place, a new warmth flowed.

HE CAME from the shadowy hall behind the throne. His arms were around her and they embraced as they had secretly at his apartment so many weeks ago.

"You brought the bag?"

She looked up at the lean, eager face, the hard lips, and worshipped his strength. She held the bag of injection needles out to him and he took them eagerly.

"Good. We must hide soon, but first, come with me..."

He walked swiftly toward the outer doors of the palace. As he walked, he talked to her. The green insect men scuttled along behind them, making queer noises, leaving those green trails of slime behind them on the floor. Phillip Jordon stopped beside one of the dead guards and put the bag on the floor.

"I must make sure," he said. "I'm not sure Brandon has the right stuff. He's clever—though—perhaps...?"

He slipped one of the needles from the bag and held it in his slim, bony fingers. He closed one eye and stared through it at the clear, blue liquid. Satisfied, he opened the cuff of the shirt on the arm of one of the guards. He pressed the needle against the flesh, pushed brutally and pressed the fluid into the arm.

Eve Granger caught her breath, staring at him with fascination.

"Do you think we have time?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm worried about Granger. He'll follow us."

He continued to stare at the stiff figure of the guard but no sign of life was evident. He drew out an-

other needle, crossed the hall and repeated the process on the arm of the other guard.

Neither of them moved.

Jordon swore.

"They'll miss you by this time."

"I did the best I could," she said, and pouted. "Phillip, you're more interested in those corpses than you are in me."

He eyed her coolly.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're a damned little fool?" he asked.

STARTLED, she stepped back a pace. Color mounted to her cheeks.

"Phillip!"

"You are," he said. "You think you're the first woman who's ever fallen for me? You're not. I'm just different enough to draw every little slut who wants to get rid of her husband."

Her eyes flashed suddenly. Her fists balled tightly.

"If you think..."

"I do," he said, and reaching out, grasped her arm firmly. "I think I'm leaving here before I'm discovered and where I go, no woman will ever follow. You fell for that sympathetic love stuff on earth, and now you've done exactly what I wanted you to do. I have Brandon's needles, and without them he hasn't a chance of reviving the people of Launn. The secret of Sulphana is safe and my work here is about over."

He twisted her arm slowly, bringing her closer to him.

"Do you like my little pets, the insect men?"

Eve Granger screamed then. Screamed and fainted in his arms. Jordon held her tightly, jerked off the screw top of the empty injection needle and filled it with one hand from a bottle he took from his pock-

et. He replaced the cover quickly, pushed the needle into her arm and drained the tube.

He dropped the girl on the floor and took a last look at the two guards by the door. Life color was mounting slowly in their cheeks.

He chuckled at the sight.

"The stuff is okay, Brandon," he said to himself. "I'll keep it, just in case."

He went back along the hall into the shadows and the insect men followed him like sulking, snarling dogs being led away from their prey.

The girl on the floor did not move.

PEEWEE Hudson was lumbering toward them with all the speed he could make. Over his shoulder was the inert figure of Eve Granger and behind him, as far as Brandon could see, were hordes of insect men.

Brandon's eyes were on the still figure of Eve Granger. Automatically he threw the motors of the car into reverse, backing slowly, waiting for PeeWee to come alongside. He heard Granger shout:

"Fire, Mrs. Hudson. For God's sake, fire over your husband's head."

He heard Jenny:

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. Granger. I never saw anything like..."

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by the sinister sputter of the fire cannon. Brandon opened the door with one hand, watching the insect men close in. They were screaming with fright, dashing about in the street to escape the flame that showered them. Brandon heard PeeWee curse as he kicked a half a dozen insect men away with his foot. Then PeeWee and the girl were in the car and the door was closed. Granger was firing as fast as he could reload the fire rifle. Jenny's cannon was singing a song of death. Brandon threw the car into reverse and they

shot back to the corner. He maneuvered the machine swiftly, opened the jets and guided the machine toward the park.

They had rescued Eve Granger too late. Her body was as stiff as any of the people of Launn. She had returned to them without the case of injection needles. His last chance was gone, unless the needles could be found.

He held no grudge against the girl who lay on the floor. He knew that she needed one of those needles herself, for her body was rigid as her husband and PeeWee Hudson kneeled beside her.

"Just like the stiffs here in Launn," he heard PeeWee whisper. "I could feel her tighten up as I carried her."

He heard Granger, his head bent over his wife's heart, weeping softly. It was the first time Brandon had seen a man cry, and it touched him strangely.

The park was close and he drove into it, stalling the motors. It was a sad, desolate party of explorers who now faced the Power without instruments to save Launn.

THE CAR was very quiet. Les Brandon worked over crucibles in the tiny laboratory. John Granger sat alone with his books, trying to read, perspiration standing out on his forehead. Jenny Hudson was beside the bunk on which Eve Granger lay, while PeeWee Hudson stood outside, staring toward the palace and mumbling angrily under his breath. Brandon stood up suddenly and came through the low door into the sleeping compartment. Jenny looked up.

"Did you find something?"

Brandon shook his head. He kneeled beside the bunk and took Eve Granger's hand in his own.

It was cold, and the flesh was growing rigid. John Granger came in.

"Isn't there something we can do— at once?"

Brandon said:

"I don't know. I found the hypo mark on her neck. PeeWee says the insect men, as he calls them, had captured her when he mowed into them with the fire rifle."

"Which means that they might have used any of two dozen different injections."

Brandon said:

"Yes! Let's look at it this way. The green men saw Eve inject shots into the blue guards. Later, PeeWee shot the guards, thinking they were going to attack him. The insect men used the needle, just as they saw Eve use it."

"Here's the problem. Eve is in a coma. Her flesh is hardening. I don't understand why, for the formulas I prepared were based on chemicals to soften the flesh and restore life. I hadn't anticipated an accident of this type, therefore I made no study of it. I have only one possible explanation. At least one of the needles contains a useless formula. A formula which kills instead of restoring life. I may be able to revive her."

"It's necessary that we find that bag of needles. Without them we're helpless. In addition to that, Eve found a formula that works on the people of Launn. It will save a lot of time if we are able to get those empty tubes back. If we can determine which one she used."

John Granger was silent for some time. Then he turned to stare down at the still, white face of his wife.

"Heart action stopped, suspended as though in death. Brandon, I don't know. It was her fault, yet, somehow I can't blame her."

Brandon shook his head.

"Would it make you feel any better if I said that I feel the same way?"

Granger looked up with kind, steady eyes.

"It would," he said.

"Look here, John," Brandon said suddenly, "Eve's headstrong and inclined to be spoiled. That's why it hurt like the devil when she took her bad temper out on me. I've spent years behind books and test tubes. Eve loves a good time and adventure. Because I'm not her idea of an exciting type, she's taking her spite out on me."

Granger nodded.

"I know."

"Understand me," Brandon went on, "Eve and I will never get along. I'm going to try every way I know to save her. After that, I'm going to clear out of Launn and leave the field to you and Eve. You and I will never make a team as long as Eve feels as she does. As for me, well," he shrugged, "I can't take it, not the way she dishes it out."

He pivoted abruptly and went into the laboratory. The door closed behind him. For a long time, Jenny Hudson stared down at the quiet face of the girl in the bunk. She heard Granger leave the room. Jenny wasn't soft, she kept telling herself. Yet, she had to reach up occasionally and brush a tear from her eye. It made her angry at herself to express such emotion.

THE THREE men stood in the darkened throne room of the palace of Launn.

Granger said:

"I have never dared explore the palace beyond this room. It is here that the insect men lurk constantly. I believe that they have tunneled into the palace from below the city, and use the palace as their headquarters."

"Good," Brandon said. "Now—it seems to me that at any disturbance,

they make their appearance here in this room before they are seen anywhere else. PeeWee, can you hold them off?"

Hudson grinned. He patted the barrel of the fire gun.

"Bring on the green goblins," he said. "I'll take care of 'em."

"Behind the door, then," Brandon said. "Give Granger and me time to get clear, then open fire."

Hudson took his position behind the heavy door.

Brandon and Granger moved across the room, behind the throne and down a short passageway deeper into the palace. Suddenly Brandon stopped in his tracks and shouted.

"PeeWee?"

Hudson answered him.

"I'm still here."

That was what Brandon wanted. Their voices echoed throughout the palace. Brandon stood very still. Sounds came from beneath them, as though giant rats were running around below the floor. Then from the shadows at the far end of the hall, an ugly yellow face appeared. It was followed quickly by another. The insect men seemed to scuttle out of nowhere, like giant, repulsive roaches, their odd voices filling the place with screams.

Brandon started to run back into the throne room. Granger was at his side. When they reached the room, they both stepped quickly out of range of Hudson's gun. Hudson's fire rifle started to roar a persistent song of death.

Granger's hand was on Brandon's arm.

"Come—quickly," he said.

The insects were falling about them. Hudson's gun continued to spurt fire. The room was already growing quiet once more.

BRANDON led the way back along the hall from the direction the insect men had come. In the corner he found a small door, still open, that led downward. They hurried through it. Hudson's gun was still firing sporadically. The first wave of insect men was dead, but perhaps they would meet others.

Stairs led deep under the palace. Then they came out into a dark hall under the throne room. Brandon felt his way along it silently. Granger was close behind.

Thus far they met no interference.

They came out into a small room. Sudden light blinded them. Light that came down a long shaft from above. Brandon stopped, his hand over his eyes, at first, then gradually he could see.

"Good Lord!"

It was Granger who first expressed their amazement.

The room, though small, was furnished beautifully with rich tapestry, and deep divans. Colorful tile covered the walls and floor.

In the direct center was a duplicate throne to the one above them. On the throne sat the loveliest girl Brandon had ever seen. Her long, blue black hair hung like fine silk around a white throat and over pale shoulders. Her dress was of the finest crimson silk and her lips were like petals, as deeply colored as her garment. She sat on a golden throne, and no one could mistake her identity.

"The Princess of Launn," Granger gasped. "I had not dreamed that she existed. I thought I had found everyone in this strange city. Yet, she is here, hidden in this lost room, waiting as the Prince waits above us."

Brandon wasn't listening. He went to his knees suddenly and picked up an empty, broken hypodermic nee-

dle, half hidden under the Princess' long skirts.

He studied it for a moment, then lifted the sleeve of the Princess' dress very gently. There, inbedded in the flesh of her right arm was the broken needle.

He swore softly.

"If those devils had succeeded in bringing her to life...?"

Something caught his attention and he sank to the floor once more and felt about under the throne. Granger heard him gasp. Then he reached far under the golden throne and pulled something into the light.

It was the missing bag. He opened it with shaking fingers and started to count. Two needles were missing. Eve, he thought, had used one. The other was broken off in the Princess' arm. What of the third? The one they had supposed had been used on Eve. He stared up at Granger.

"At least we have a chance now," he said. "Perhaps we can save Eve."

"Not so fast, gentlemen," someone said coldly.

BRANDON, still kneeling, came to his feet swiftly, whirling around. He heard Granger catch his breath, then he saw the tall, cadaverous man at the door holding wicked looking 'tomic-pistols in each hand.

"Phillip Jordon," Granger said in a bewildered voice. "How...?"

"How did so civilized a person as I manage to be so far from home? Is that the general idea of what you were going to ask?"

Jordon came into the room slowly, his eyes almost satanic, ever watchful.

Granger said no more.

"I'll tell you," Jordon said, "but surely you don't want to stand here to hear my explanation? It's a long-

winded affair, and if you'll follow a few simple instructions, we'll find a much more comfortable place in which to talk over our desires and ambitions."

He made an abrupt stabbing motion toward the door and his upper lip curled slightly.

"March!"

Brandon started to pick up his bag.

"Leave the needles here," Jordon snapped. "I was enjoying a most interesting pastime when you interfered. You unnerved me for a moment. In my clumsiness, I broke one of the needles. Later, I'll work on the lovely young woman with more care. I'm interested in such a beauty—alive."

Brandon put the bag on the floor slowly.

"You're a coward, Jordon," he said slowly. "You've got two guns on your side now, but if we ever meet with the cards evenly divided, I'll..."

"Shut up," Jordon snapped. "Now—march."

He followed them out of the room and into the dark passage.

"Follow the wall with your fingertips," he said. "It is quite a long way to where we are going."

The three men moved slowly along the wall. Brandon thought once of trying to escape in the darkness. When he halted Jordon said harshly:

"Keep moving. I hear very well. I can shoot at the slightest sound."

"Better wait," Granger whispered. "We'll find out where Jordon fits into this. Later—we may have a chance..."

Jordon chuckled.

"You may as well talk aloud, Granger. I told you I can hear almost anything."

The hall ended abruptly.

"Feel about until you find the ring," Jordon said. "It's a door. Pull on the ring."

Brandon found the iron ring and pulled it. The big door opened toward him and beyond it was a well lighted area, probably fifty feet square, constructed of huge, rough-hewn stone.

"In the far wall you'll see another door," Jordon said. "That's where we end the journey."

Watching them carefully, he produced a key, opened the second door and motioned them inside.

GRANGER went in first. His eyes were wide with amazement, but he remained silent. Brandon followed, and after him, Jordon locked the door from the inside.

"Nice little home here among the dead," Jordon said. "I like to be comfortable, as I must spend several weeks each year in this ungodly hole."

The place was large, and might have been the living room of any American home. The walls were insulated and painted a neat blue-gray. A huge desk occupied one corner of the place. Beyond it, there were a davenport, chair and small table. There were glassware, a neat bed made up with colorful blankets, everything one man could wish for comfortable living.

"As you see," Jordon said, "there is only room for one to live here. Three of us could never do it, but for a few minutes, you are welcome. After that, I have something to show you."

He moved to the desk and sat down.

"You're feeling very clever and sure of yourself," Brandon said. "You've bathed yourself in mystery

and power and you love the feeling."

Jordon smiled.

"Sit down," he said.

He placed the pistols on the desk before him.

"First, perhaps because as you say, I like the feeling of power, I'm going to share my mystery with you."

"It has to do with Sulphana, doesn't it," Brandon said. "Jordon, the unsung king of the Sulphana trust."

Jordon grinned.

"Hell," he said, enjoying himself immensely, "I am Sulphana. I found it, exploited it and let Weston in as a silent partner. Sulphana Inc. is just a front."

Brandon heard Granger gasp with amazement. No wonder, he thought. Weston posed as an honest research worker and led a huge non-profit organization. No wonder Weston had thrown Granger out on his ear.

"Charles Weston wouldn't like to hear you talk that way, Jordon," he said gently. "Weston would be angry."

Jordon frowned.

"To hell with Weston," he said abruptly. "He's just a stooge. I could break him over night. But back to Sulphana. You're sitting on top of the only Sulphana producing factory in the planetary system."

Granger chuckled. He seemed to regain much of the spirit that had been looking for the past months. Brandon thought it was because of what Jordon said about Weston.

"There are no factories running in Launn," he said. "Jordon, you aren't that smart."

Jordon arose.

"Perhaps I'm not," he said. "We'll see."

HE MOVED to the center of the room and went down on one

knee. Pushing aside the rug, he fumbled for an iron ring set in the stone, and lifted a small round trap-door.

"Look down there," he said, and backed away a safe distance.

Brandon went first. He was careful not to get too close to the door. He stared down into a vast, semi-twilight. It was a lower cavern, and the floor of it, as far as he could see was covered with crawling insect people. He shuddered at the thought of being pushed down into that mess. The cavern was packed with them, crawling over and over each other. Then his eye saw one detail that had escaped his first glance.

Directly below him, at the foot of a long iron ladder was a pile of what appeared to be pure Sulphana.

He moved aside and let Granger look at the scene. He stood up and waited for Jordon to explain.

"You once said in a report of yours," Jordon said, "that Sulphana couldn't be broken down into known chemical units. You were right, Brandon, when you claimed it was a natural product of an animal or plant. That hive of insect people is like a hive of bees. They give off a green slime. When the slime hardens, it grows powdery. The dust is Sulphana, the greatest healer ever discovered."

Granger was still studying the scene below.

"But how did you find...?"

"Simple," Jordon said. "Sulphana first came to Fitzroy when I was there on a tour of the planet. I experimented with it and recognized its value. I found an old Burtell caravan master who knew where it came from. He said the natives of the Plain of Parna used it in curing their Burtells when they were in-

fected or wounded. He found the stuff in a storage vat here in Launn.

"When I came here the first time, some years before your first visit, I stumbled onto the insect men. The slime they secreted during their battle with me hardens and I discovered the source of Sulphana. Later, I traced them here and found the main body of workers in the cavern below. When Launn was alive, this must have been a great industry.

"I found that by wearing a metallic suit, I could go down there without fear of them harming me. Their teeth are not long or sharp. Their stingers cannot penetrate metal.

"Weston backed me and we went to work, quietly. That's the story, gentlemen, and I regret that you can't make use of it."

Brandon stood very still, his jaw grim.

"Perhaps we can," he said.

Somewhere outside the room a scream of a returning insect man sounded.

"I think not," Jordon said swiftly. "Wait—I must see if one of my pets has been harmed. They've grown quite fond of me—and I of them."

He pushed the door open.

"Look out, you knock kneed son-uv-a-tadpole!"

EVEN BRANDON was taken off guard by PeeWee Hudson's battle cry, as the huge ex-janitor came through the door in approved tackle style. He hit Jordon below the knees and sent him sprawling. One of Jordon's guns flew from his hands and hit the wall. He managed to fire the other and it tore a gapping hole in the wall near Brandon's shoulder.

"Think I can't imitate one of the green heathens, do you," Hudson

shouted. "Take it easy with them guns."

He had Jordon by the coat collar now and was lifting him clear of the floor. He wrenched the other gun from Jordon's hand and tossed it to Granger.

"Better keep this, Mr. Granger," he said. "Maybe next time I won't be lucky enough to get here in time."

The picture of Jordon, hanging two inches from the floor at the end of Hudson's huge arm, was suddenly very funny to Brandon. So much had happened. In ten minutes, so many things had become clear. Jordon, first so dangerous and sure of himself, looked like a dilapidated, sputtering clown.

Brandon started to laugh.

"Good Lord," he said. "Let's get out of here before we all go crazy. We've learned enough for one day."

"I wonder," Granger said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we can learn enough. Now that we know the issues at stake, the battle is just beginning."

"The Melform injection fluid was in both tubes," Brandon said. "That means that, regardless of what caused the deaths of the population, Melform will bring them back to life. Melform was used on both the blue guards. Jordon used a paralysis fluid on Eve. That had me fooled."

John Granger listened attentively. His was not medical knowledge. He was in charge of research work, when and if Launn was restored to life. Now, as they sat together in Brandon's compartment, Granger's face was gray and lined with worry. They had both agreed that the work must go on. That Eve stood a chance of recovery, and even now had been treated carefully and placed in Jenny's care.

"Then I say that we should set up the laboratory in the square before the palace," Granger suggested. "As men and women are revived, we will attempt to explain what we are doing and solicit their help. In a short time, if all goes well, we can establish a large clinic."

"Fortunately," Brandon added, "Melform can be made from a highly concentrated drug I have brought in large quantities. It is one of the simplest of all the types. The theory is to soften the body and stimulate circulation."

PEEWEE HUDSON came from his post at the far side of the car. His face was grim and the fire rifle he had used so often was still clutched tightly in his hands.

"The green goblins don't want to fight," he said. "What do we do now?"

Brandon explained the situation and the plan to establish a clinic. Hudson nodded delightedly.

"Let's get started," he suggested. "Once we get a bunch of these Launn people on their feet, we'll have an army to fight those green hob-goblins. They ain't done with us yet."

Jenny stuck her head out of the upper door and shouted excitedly:

"That Melform stuff seems to be working. Mrs. Granger is beginning to breathe."

They rushed into the car and Brandon spent a bad five minutes with Eve Granger. The heart beat was very slow at first, staggering, and at times stopping completely. Then color started to show in her cheeks. The flesh of her arms softened and grew pink. Her eyes opened.

She saw John Granger, her husband, first, his worried eyes on her.

Tears started to course slowly down her cheeks and she tried to speak.

He pressed his fingers to her forehead.

"It's all right now," he said. "You're going to be all right. You're safe in the car."

Her lips moved.

He leaned close, trying to understand her words. She was trying desperately to say something to him and at last he could hear her faint whisper.

"I'm—I'm sorry. I've been an awful fool."

Granger leaned close and kissed her gently on the cheek. There was no mistaking the flood of color that tinged her face. Granger looked up. There was a suggestion of a smile on Brandon's lips.

THE PRINCE of Launn lay on a stretcher under the warmth of the afternoon sun. The square was large, and the car, with the stretcher at its side, looked very small and unimportant in the center of so vast a place.

PeeWee was in the upper compartment, his hand on the barrel of the fire cannon. Eve Granger, still weak, lay where she could look out the window and down at the scene below.

Brandon, in his white frock, drew a sterilized needle from the sterilizer, pressed the needle to the arm of the Prince and pressed gently. He released the fluid into the dead arm, withdrew the needle, covered the tiny spot with a sterilized bandage and straightened. He stared across the stretcher at John Granger.

"Now—time will tell."

Launn seemed even more silent in those moments. Brandon's wrist watch ticked so loudly that he could count the seconds. Granger walked

a short distance away, returned and placed his fingers on the Prince's pulse. He shook his head.

"The mixture may not work the same in all cases."

Brandon shook his head.

"It has to," he insisted. "Whatever happened to one, must have happened to them all. The results would be the same."

Three minutes passed—then four. Jenny, at Eve Granger's side, stared out of the window with wide eyes. PeeWee was leaning out the open hatchway above, the cannon forgotten. Then something moved gently on the stretcher. The wind? It could not be. The square was still. No breeze stirred.

"His fingers," John Granger said tensely. "Watch his fingers."

Brandon smiled.

"I noticed," he said.

"He's—alive," Granger said tensely.

The fingers, then the entire right arm moved, flexed and bent at the elbow. The man's eyes opened and stared upward. Blank amazement was in those eyes, then came fear, so pathetic that Brandon pitied the Prince from the bottom of his heart.

"You're going to be all right," he said quietly and placed his palm on the Prince's forehead. The man flinched. His neck muscles were working. He turned his head and tried to get escape from Brandon's hand. The body came alive. The Prince moved about on the stretcher.

"Walla," he said.

Brandon looked at Granger.

"Have you any system for the study of their language?"

Granger shook his head.

"None," he admitted. "We have no way of knowing how many centuries the city dates back into time."

BRANDON waited. The Prince sat up weakly, leaning on one elbow. He stared about at the deserted city, then at the two men. He seemed very puzzled at their presence.

"Walla?" he repeated.

Brandon shook his head.

"Can't understand you," he said. "Sorry."

He went into the car and came back with a bowl of Jenny's soup. He took a spoonful and held it to the Prince's lips. The Prince hesitated, then let the hot broth slip down his throat. A broad smile transformed his handsome face.

"Goot."

"That was evident enough," Granger said happily. "Goot—Good—close enough to guess at."

The Prince sat up. He started to struggle to his feet, and then fell back. His own weakness seemed to amaze him. Brandon helped him up. The Prince seemed to be trying to get back into the palace. Both Granger and Brandon helped him, and PeeWee Hudson stayed with the car. In the throne room, the Prince continued to stare around, puzzled, impatient with the silence.

He turned to Brandon and released a flood of odd, tangled words. Brandon shook his head again and the Prince seemed to know what he meant. He motioned toward the long passageway that went toward the rear of the palace. Stronger now, he carried himself well, and Brandon was forced to admit that the man was one of the finest specimens he had ever seen.

They came to a small, metal studied door and the Prince reached beneath his robe and brought out a small key. He inserted it into a lock and pushed the door open. Brandon gasped.

"A laboratory," he said in a low

voice. "More complete than our own."

The small room was well lighted from above. The Prince crossed the room and halted before a cabinet. He opened the door and tried to push Granger inside. Granger got the idea. He sat down and the Prince closed the door. He turned and smiled at Brandon in a reassuring manner. Then he pressed down a number of levers on the side of the cabinet and spoke into a mouth-piece on the door.

THROUGH the crystal door Brandon saw Granger smile. Brandon knew what it was all about. The Prince was talking rapidly. Finally he stopped and Brandon could see Granger's lips moving. He watched the Prince's face. First it expressed only bewilderment. Then gradually, terror once more. At last he made odd little gestures with his hand, as though he had given up trying to understand. He opened the door and Granger came out.

"He's unable to grasp what has happened," Granger said. "He says he fell asleep yesterday on his throne and today he awakens to find two strange people near him. He demands an explanation. I told him that he's been asleep for thousands of years and it seems to frighten him half to death. See how far you can get with the man."

It was obvious that the cabinet was a language translator, of a far advanced design over the simple types used on earth. Brandon resigned himself to the machine. The door closed and he started through the crystal door to the Prince. The Prince's voice, transcribed and changed by the machine, produced pleasing, gentle English speech.

"Your colleague—tells—a strange—story. Tell me—the truth. Tell—

me why you—have come to Launn. Where are my people?"

Brandon tried to speak simply. He knew that the lesson the Prince must learn would be a hard one.

"Listen to me," he said. "This is the year of 2024. Many years ago a legend reached Martian cities that a strange place existed at the far rim of the Plain of Parna. The city, it was called Launn, was supposed to be full of dead people."

He was watching the Prince closely. The man's lips were repeating his words. His eyes were on Brandon.

"No man had the courage to enter the dead city," Brandon went on. "At last my colleague and I came with drugs to release you and your people. You are quite safe now, and it is only a matter of time before the remainder of your city will be freed from death."

The Prince shook his head impatiently.

"I am sorry," he said. "I do not believe. Launn is very much alive. If what you say is true, I would have slept for ten thousand years."

He frowned.

"That would be impossible. I shall be forced to call the guards. To imprison you until further investigation."

Brandon couldn't blame him for feeling as he did. Memories could not live while a man lay dead. Today would be but one day removed from the hour that the Prince fell asleep. Evidently he remembered nothing of what had happened.

"I ask for one favor," Brandon said. "First, you cannot call the guards for they are as stiff as you were a half hour ago. I don't ask you to believe. Let me out of the box. I will convince you."

ANGER showed on the Prince's face. He opened the door quickly and Brandon came out. Brandon led him from the room and down to the hidden door through which he and Granger had gone to find the lovely girl in the room below the palace. He went down the steps swiftly, the Prince behind him.

He pushed the door open and went into the presence of the dead Princess. The Prince pushed him roughly aside and with an anguished sob, fell on his knees before the Princess. His hands sought hers, and came away slowly. He shook her gently by the shoulders, but the body remained still and cold.

Sobs shook his body. He still did not understand that a few minutes before, he had resembled the Princess. That she could be revived as he had been.

Brandon stepped forward and put his hand on the Prince's shoulder. He motioned toward the girl, then put his arm around her waist and started to lift her. The Prince understood. He pushed Brandon aside and lifted the girl in his arms. He turned and carried her up the stairs and out into the square. When she had been deposited on the stretcher, he straightened, turned to Brandon and motioned in a manner to indicate that Brandon had charge. He stepped away a few paces and watched as the hypos were prepared. Never had Brandon seen a man with such a combination of fear and pride etched on his face.

“AND THAT is the story of what has happened on Mars and on Earth since, according to your figures, the city of Launn ceased to live.”

Brandon stopped talking for a moment, studying the faces of the

Prince and Princess through the crystal glass of the language translator cabinet. He was warm and uncomfortable in the small box. It had been removed from the laboratory and placed before the thrones in the throne room. Both the Prince and the lovely girl of the hidden chamber sat before him, listening attentively.

"You say that there is no explanation for what happened to us?"

It was the Prince who spoke, finally convinced that the story of Launn was true.

Brandon shook his head.

"None," he said, "unless you can offer one."

The Prince shook his head.

"None," he repeated. He turned to look at the girl. Her hair and eyes were dark and alive. She was, Brandon thought, one of the most charming little imps he had ever seen.

"My sister and I," the Prince said, "are grateful to you both. We will try to reward you as you deserve. Now, let me tell you what I know. It would be ten centuries ago that my father, King Fanta, established his Kingdom here. He chose an isolated spot where his people could dwell without outside interference. Fanta brought the finest builders, scientists and men of all crafts here from throughout the solar system. We were not troubled by war or by petty bargaining. All our time was spent developing a perfect civilization."

He sighed.

"Fanta died, and the City of Launn passed into our care. My sister's name is Fawn, named for the graceful creatures who once roamed in our parks."

Fawn blushed prettily.

"I am Barbic," the Prince said. "I

carried on as my father wished. Never did Launn contact the outside. Never did our people grow restless. If we prospered and went far beyond other cities in scientific research, it was because we contacted no one, fought with no one and spent our days in bettering everything that we owned."

"And a wonderful job you did," Brandon said with enthusiasm. "Yet, during all this conversation, you've never once mentioned anything to give us a clue to what happened on that day that the people of Launn ceased to breathe."

PRINCE BARBIC shook his head. Suddenly he looked tired.

"I have no explanation," he admitted. "It is like yesterday, and I remember it well. I sat on the throne, musing over the day's accomplishments. Fawn was in her private room below, a place where she often rested. I thought of her, and of my people and what Launn had done to make them happy. I must have fallen asleep. When I awakened again, I was lying in the square, looking up at men I had never seen before."

Fawn nodded.

"I also experienced the same sensation." Her voice was low. "I awakened, to look at," she blushed and pointed a small finger at Brandon, "you."

Brandon said:

"There is a plan to be carried out. You will help us revive members of your city. As they are awakened, you will explain what happened and enlist their help. My friend, John Granger has charted the location of every citizen of Launn.

"With his help, as people awaken, they will bring others. The square will serve as clinic. There are over six million souls to be awakened. It will be a long job."

Prince Barbic arose. Tears shone in his eyes. He came down from the throne.

"Although you are unable to understand me when you are not in the machine, I express my deepest gratitude."

His voice broke.

Brandon understood. So did Granger. Brandon gripped Barbic's hand tightly. They went arm in arm out into the square.

EVE GRANGER sincerely thought she hated Phillip Jordon during those days immediately after Brandon saved her from the paralysis drug. Then, remembering him as he had been on earth, she began to wonder if she should help Jordon escape from the cell he had been thrown into by Prince Barbic. Eve Granger knew Jordon well. Had known him long before she met her present husband. Knew that Jordon would be grateful, and perhaps forgiving.

As Launn changed slowly into a pulsing, living city, she had time to be alone and to plot Jordon's release. She found it impossible to look at her husband with anything but pity. He was old, it seemed to her. She, in her youth, demanded more from life than he could give.

Today, one of the rare moments when Launn was a dark, gloomy place and a mountain storm hung over the city, she had ample time to carry out her half-formed plan. Granger and Brandon were at the palace with Prince Barbic. Eve's lip curled as she sat in the lounge of the car, the forgotten book on her lap. Brandon liked the palace very well, lately. Fawn, Barbic's sister, was a very attractive girl.

Eve felt a tinge of jealousy creep through her. Brandon had been interested in her at first. She was quite sure of that. She had spoiled it with

her own sharp tongue.

Jordon was her only chance now. Her only opportunity to escape this new, strange world and return to the luxuries of earth.

She stood up abruptly, let the book fall to the floor, and went into her sleeping room. John Granger had wanted to accept Barbic's invitation and take quarters at the palace. She had refused to go. She liked the car. Here, she was the mistress of the house. She couldn't see Fawn every day and not remember that her own loveliness was beginning to desert her. It made her feel old.

She dressed quickly in whipcoats and boots. It wouldn't be difficult to see Phillip Jordon. She had been into the prison often with Barbic and John. The guards would admit her. She slipped a small fire pistol under her leather tunic and left the car. At the palace she avoided the main entrance and sought the metal door near the rear of the establishment. This was the direct entrance to the cells beneath the palace.

A guard smiled happily because she had chosen to honor him with a visit. He escorted her to Jordon's cell, the only one occupied at the present time.

She waited while he opened the door.

"Thank you very much," she smiled at him sweetly.

The guard couldn't understand a word. He smiled profusely and backed away.

Jordon was at the door in a second. "Welcome," Jordon said. "I hardly expected you here."

He took the pistol she offered him. "I—I had to help," she said. A slow fear welled up within her.

Jordon said, "They'll punish you for this if they catch you."

SHE PIVOTED to face him. Her cheeks flushed.

"Phillip, I forgive you for what you did the other day. I had to come. I love you. Don't you understand?"

She threw herself into his arms, sobbing.

"Don't leave me here. Take me with you. That's why I came. I had to escape. I can't stand..."

He pushed her away from him coolly.

"You know damned well I can't leave here now."

"Can't—leave...?"

He swore softly.

"You'll never understand me," he said. "It isn't that I don't enjoy your company. I simply don't live a life that you can endure. I must protect my interests here. The Sulphana supply has been cut off since I've been in that damned cell. Burtell caravans wait outside the city for my signal to enter and load up. Since Launn became a living city again, they've been waiting patiently for my orders. At least, I hope they are still waiting."

"The Foundation and Weston are going crazy waiting for information from me. We've got to start the flow of Sulphana again."

"But—how?"

Jordon looked grim.

"By destroying every last inhabitant in this city, if it proves necessary."

Eve Granger looked nervously down the long deserted hall.

"We'd better get out of here now while we can," she said. "Later—we can plan."

Jordon looked amazed.

"You're still willing to go with me—willing to live like an animal and fight side by side with those loathsome things in the caverns, just for my companionship?"

She nodded resolutely.

"Wherever you go," she said.

He grasped her by the shoulders and drew her to him roughly.

Her eyes were shining.

"Then I can go?"

"To hell—if I end up there," he said. "Come on."

BRANDON left the dining hall quietly, thinking that he had evaded the attention of Barbic and John Granger who had been discussing the culture of early Launn when he left. Granger and Barbic were so happy at striking upon a simple, universal language that they talked like small boys, without thought of stopping.

Brandon wasn't aware of the sly smiles they gave each other as he wandered purposefully out to the terrace.

He saw the slim, silver clad figure of Fawn at the far end of the terrace and hurried toward her. She pretended not to notice him as he approached, and turned with startled, pleased eyes as he spoke to her.

"Oh! I did not hear you approach."

Wonderful, he thought, how this girl and her brother have learned English in so short a time. Granger had done the job with the language translator. It was a matter of close attention and lip reading. Now she spoke as well as Eve Granger, but with a little lilt in her voice that was her own.

"I'm sorry I frightened you," he said. "I planned to start work on the defense system tomorrow. I wondered if you'd care to accompany me to the laboratories."

She smiled happily. Each was new at this game of hearts. Each hesitant and unsure.

"I'd be very happy."

She made the simple word 'happy' sound like a description of Heaven.

"Good," he said. "I'll call for you in the morning. I hope it won't bore you."

She leaned back against the broad

wall of the terrace and smiled up at him.

"I'm afraid I do not know how to say it, Mister Brandon," she said hesitantly, "but I am never bored when I am with you. Perhaps I talk too much. My brother says I talk all the time. When I have something inside of me, I say it."

Brandon's face turned slightly pink.

"That's the way it should be," he said. He felt like a high school boy on his first date. Eve Granger had been the first woman who ever upset his sense of balance. Fawn did a much more thorough job of it. The faint odor of her perfume in the darkness—the silver gown, trailing about her. "I'm—I'm that way myself."

She stepped close to him.

"Then why don't you say it?"

He gulped and remained silent. He imagined a fish might feel this way when drawn out into the air.

"What I meant was that it was only a short time ago, I awakened and looked up at you," Fawn was saying. He didn't hear all of her words. He was watching her face. The full lips forming into words—the sparkling, mischievous eyes. "I told Barbic then that I wanted you for my husband. Barbic threatened to spank me for saying it, but, I still think I should say what is inside me. Don't you, Mister Brandon?"

BRANDON felt as though rockets were going off inside his head. This was the first time he had gathered nerve enough to see the girl alone, and he had hoped to tell her that she was lovely. Now he was listening to a proposal of marriage.

"I—"

He stopped abruptly and took her in his arms.

Minutes later, she drew away from him gently and tossed her hair back

from her face. Her cheeks were flushed and happy.

"I think," she said in a teasing voice, "that Mister PeeWee Hudson would call that the direct approach, don't you—Les?"

Brandon didn't answer. He took her in his arms again.

JOHAN GRANGER came into the laboratory quickly. He hurried down the long line of white frocked workers and stopped at Brandon's table.

"Les, we've got hell to pay. Eve is gone. Jordon has escaped."

Brandon came to his feet, the high stool hitting the floor behind him.

"Escaped? But how?"

Granger's eyes were hard. His jaw was set.

"I said Eve was gone."

Brandon thought he understood. He couldn't say so.

"I don't see the connection," he said.

Granger's eyes didn't falter from his.

"I'm no fool, Les. I may be old, but not an old fool. Eve has been after Jordon for years. I knew that. I suspect she was with Jordon during those first days in Launn. For some reason, he got rid of her. Now she's helped him escape and has gone with him."

Brandon didn't try to argue. In his heart he knew that Granger was right.

"Where do you think they'll go?"

Granger, now that the worst was told, looked very tired. He slumped on a chair.

"I'm sure of just one thing," he admitted. "Jordon won't leave Launn. His interests are tied up here. He'll try to destroy us in some way. He'll get back his control over Sulphana, or die trying."

"Barbic has the insect men under

control," Brandon said. "Launn has been deserted for a long time. There may be more colonies of the creatures. If Jordon were to release them..."

"They'd cause a lot of trouble," Granger said. "Have we anything to defend ourselves? Can we fight them?"

Brandon shook his head.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Barbic said Launn never fought a war during its earlier existence. I expected an attack by the insect people sooner or later. I've been working here on a gas that could be used to keep the insect people quiet. It dopes them so that they go on living and producing, but do not have the will to fight."

"It's not the insect people that I'm worried about," Granger admitted, "so much as I am Jordon himself. He can't enlist help from earth because it would give away the location of his Sulphana source and bring the whole deal to light. He'll try to fight alone, and Jordon fighting alone isn't a pretty picture to conjure up."

"Poison?" Brandon asked.

"Poison and sabotage of the lowest type. Jordon fought during the Sparta uprising on Venus. He has a reputation for using any means to reach his end. Killed off an entire city once by placing Gangus-fungus in the water supply."

Brandon started for the door.

"I've got to see Barbic," he said. "We'll have to take every possible precaution."

Granger was close behind him.

"Then what?"

Brandon stopped and turned shortly.

"Then I'm going to find Jordon."

"JORDON'S hiding somewhere under the palace," Brandon said.

"I'm sure of that. I imagine he has tunnels that lead to the edge of the city. Probably the place is honey-combed with the things."

He stood patiently while Granger helped adjust the mask over his face and clamp down the light helmet.

"The suit was used by divers who cleaned the water supply tanks," Prince Barbic offered. "It's constructed of light but very tough metalura. It should protect you from the insect people."

The room was very quiet for a moment. Granger busied himself with the last adjustment on the knee-joints. Barbic wandered to the window and stared down at the peaceful city.

"I feel like a knight," Brandon said sourly. "Going off to fight for my lady. Only I'm going down into the tunnels to look for a rat."

Granger straightened.

"See here, Brandon, I..."

"It's no use, John," Brandon said, suddenly sober. "This is a one man job. There is only one suit, and I don't need help with Jordon. Once I find him..."

"It seems very odd," Barbic said from the window, "that so peaceful a city could be threatened. There is the man, Jordon, and another terrible threat we have not discussed lately."

Granger stared at Brandon.

"The Power," he said. "We've got to do something about that."

Brandon smiled a little grimly behind the glassine mask.

"I think I have a clue to the Power," he said. "There's no immediate danger if I'm correct. We'll find Jordon, then."

Granger was puzzled.

"You've found out what the Power is?"

Brandon nodded.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "It all

has to do with a very terrible tragedy that occurred on earth centuries ago. This is but a repeat performance. I think that it can be avoided if we can escape it in time."

They would have questioned him further if Fawn had not entered the room. She saw Brandon in the odd looking suit and rushed to him. Her eyes were filled with anxiety.

"A courier told me," she said, "you go after Jordon?"

Brandon nodded.

"I'll be back soon," he said.

Barbic, trying to comfort his sister, came to their side.

"He says he is a knight going to fight for his lady. Is his lady proud of him?"

Fawn's shoulders straightened and a smile came out like the sun on her pale face.

"Very—very—proud," she said and on tip-toe, kissed the glassine mask that covered Brandon's face.

"And now," Granger said quietly, "I think it best that I go alone with Brandon to the cellars beneath the palace. I will leave him in the tunnel. We must be very quiet."

THE CAVERN room above the insect colony was deserted. However, to Brandon, it betrayed the fact that Jordon had come this way. Eve had been here, for he could smell her faint perfume in the room. He searched the room carefully, and found an empty chest. Almost empty, for at the bottom was a small mask with a tight rubber band that was evidently meant to hold it on the face. The mask was metal, a type of nose guard used by earth-men who fought in the Spear wars. He guessed that the chest had contained complete suits of armor of the Spear War type, and that the mask had been forgotten or purposely left behind. To back up his theory, the only way out of the

room, other than back in the direction he had come, was through the trap-door in the floor.

He lifted and found the iron ladder. It was a matter of seconds before he stood on the floor of the cavern below, surrounded by the repulsive insect people.

He steeled himself against the sight of them, and felt their teeth grate against the metal of his suit and slide off.

At first they came close, sniffing and biting at him. Then apparently satisfied that they could do no harm, they went about their business.

He stared about the strange "hive". It was probably two hundred feet long cut out of solid rock. At the far end was a dark hole in the wall. A tunnel leading from the hive.

He made his way toward it, stumbling over the creatures and falling among them. In the tunnel he moved forward, feeling his way. He must have walked a mile through the winding chamber when he saw light ahead once more.

This time it was the light of the desert, and he came out on a small ridge some distance outside of Launn.

The cave was hidden by rough cactus growths, and below in a little valley were dozens of small, scrubby looking Burtells, their shaggy ears sticking straight into the air, their ugly, six toed feet planted patiently in the hot sand.

Near the far end of the valley was a large tent and men were going into it.

Jordon's temporary office, he thought, and sat down in the sand at the mouth of the cave where he could watch the tent and whoever came from it.

A half hour passed and a girl came out, slipped a desert shield over her head and came toward him.

Eve Granger, he thought grimly.

She was intent on reaching the coolness of the cave, and he watched her climb the little ridge and come toward him.

HE SLIPPED out of sight behind an outcropping of rock and waited. The girl came into the cave. She was no more than six feet from him. He waited until she sat down, her back to the rock, her eyes on the scene below. Then swiftly he slipped up behind her, held her with one arm firmly around her neck and gagged her with her scarf.

She struggled vainly, kicking, scratching and trying to cry out. Grimly he held on until she subsided and lay quietly in his arms.

"Listen to me," Brandon said. "This time it isn't a game. I'm playing for keeps. I'll kill you if you cause me any trouble."

She nodded, and he could see fear in her eyes.

"You're going back," he said. "John can do what he wants to with you, but you're going back. Do you understand?"

She stared at the ground, sulking, refusing to acknowledge him.

"I don't want you," he said. "I want Jordon. Is he coming back this way?"

No answer. Brandon was growing impatient.

"You'd better talk, Eve. You've done enough already. If any harm comes to Launn because of you, you'll be punished like any other criminal. Why don't you be sensible. Jordon is hard. He doesn't want you. He wants Launn for himself."

He was bluffing, but he saw that his words made an impression on her.

"Aren't you smart enough to know that your usefulness to Jordon is over?"

She looked up at him suddenly, appealingly, as though she wanted to speak.

"Do you know Jordon's plan?" he asked.

She nodded, and he could see that he had guessed right about Jordon. He was tired of Eve, and she knew it.

"If you'll promise to be quiet, I'll take the gag from your mouth."

She nodded again, and he released it. She was breathless.

"Les—I've been a fool—an ungrateful one at that."

EITHER she was a fine little actor, or a change had taken place in Eve Gardner's attitude during the last few moments.

"Go on," Brandon said coolly. "I'll hear it all, then I'll decide if I can trust you."

She smiled a little wanly.

"You're just about breaking my arm with your manly grip," she said. "If I promise not to run, will you loosen your hold a little?"

He did so, wondering if she was stalling for time.

Eve's eyes grew suddenly fiery.

"Jordon is a fool," she said. "A first class one. He tried to get rid of me once before, but I was crazy enough about him to follow him again. This time I wanted to escape but I didn't have anywhere to go. Les, if I tell you something that is very important—something that has to do with the safety of Launn, will you help me escape from this—this sink-hole of Hell?"

Brandon stared at her.

"If you're lying again...!"

"But I'm not," she said earnestly. "This time I'm on the level. I've been square with you from the first, Les. I had to be. I'm a damned poor excuse for a woman, Les. I'm better off away from John and he's lucky to be rid of me."

She was talking quietly, as though discussing a business deal.

"John is a great man. He doesn't

know it, and that's what makes him great. I used to work for Charles Weston and that's how I got mixed up in this Sulphana mess. John Granger was dangerous and Weston paid me to watch him. The marriage was the unexpected part, but in Weston's mind, marriage is unimportant. The big thing was that I must watch John's every move and report to Weston, so that he would be ready to step in and save Sulphana's interests regardless of what happened."

"And Jordon," Brandon asked coldly. "Where does he fit into the mess?"

Her face was warm and flushed now. She had started the story. She had to finish.

"Phil Jordon and I ran around together for years," she admitted. "He's always treated me like a worm, and I've gone back for more." She shrugged, and a shudder swept through her. "Until now, he's always called me and I've gone to him. This time I'm all washed up."

Brandon wondered how much of what she said was the truth. He was inclined to believe most of it.

"What's Jordon up to now that makes him repulsive to you?"

She put her hand on his arm and stared up into his face.

"Don't get me wrong, Les," she said. "Jordon isn't repulsive to me. He's an ugly brute, but I've chased him since I was a kid. I'll never stop chasing him. It was like a habit. It didn't work out, and I'm not going back again."

Brandon knew she meant it.

HE STARED down at the tent. The sun was still high and shimmering heat danced about the dark cloth of Jordon's shelter. The Burtells were seeking shade. No other movement was visible on the desert.

He broke the spell of silence.

"You're telling me the truth," he said. "I'm quite sure of that. It's funny—about women like you, I mean. You make a complete damn fool of yourself, then expect by telling the truth, regardless of how ugly it is, to clean the slate at the first try. I don't know how I can help you. I'd never face John Granger again if I helped you escape. Why don't you go to him...."

"Les," the girl's voice was sharp, yet pleading. "I can't do that. John has been square with me. He's always trusted me. I couldn't tell him...."

He knew she couldn't. That she wouldn't have the courage to hurt him.

"What is Jordon going to do?" he asked.

"He's going to wait," she said simply.

He looked at her sharply.

"Wait—for what?"

"For the Power to return and destroy Launn once more. He said it is coming soon, and that he will have a clear field once more. That there will be no one to trouble him."

He grasped her hands, gripping them tightly. His eyes were suddenly stern.

"Eve—you know what the Power is? Jordon told you?"

She was no longer afraid. She had one ace card left and she meant to play it carefully.

"I know."

"Then you've got to tell me at once. We've got to be prepared."

She pulled away from him gently and he let her go. They faced each other, each pleading silently for his case. Each wondering how far he must go to win the point.

"I've—I've got to get away safely, without seeing John," she said.

"Eve—an entire city faces death, and you're making me bargain for their lives."

She was desperate.

"I've got to get away. I know I'm a coward. I've been a coward, but this is the last time I'll have a chance to drive a bargain. My freedom against a city. Les—will you promise to help?"

Inside Brandon there seethed a combination of loyalty to John Granger and the knowledge that Launn had to be saved, regardless of the price. If Granger found out...

From deep in the tunnel, a sudden rumbling noise echoed and re-echoed. A rush of wind whipped up and the sand blew Eve Granger's dress tightly about her. She fell, crying out, and Brandon drew her back into the protection of the rocks.

THE WIND was howling about them now with great intensity, filling the air with fine, blowing sand.

He couldn't shout above the sound. He stared out of the tunnel and down at the valley below, with wonder-filled eyes. A great transformation had suddenly taken place in the desert camp.

The first gust of wind seemed to have come from inside the tunnel, yet the desert also was in the midst of a violent storm. He held the girl tightly against him, for the wind was so strong that they would have been separated and lost in the storm. Jordan's huge tent bellied out and twisted free from the desert floor. It swept upward into the air and disappeared across the Plain of Parna.

He couldn't see the men below, but he could make out the forms of the Burtells, lying with their heads away from the wind, already half buried in the sand.

He put his lips to Eve's ear and shouted.

"This is no sand storm. It's—it's something far worse. A wind like this

isn't normal."

She nodded, her face close to his chest, choking for her breath. The desert was growing dark. In two minutes, he thought, it will be as dark as night. He stared upward through the haze of flying sand. A huge black cloud was flying over head, straight out across the plain. Yet, was it a cloud? It seemed to drift and break apart, and drift together again. It swept close to the ground and particles of it, mixed with the sand, fell about them. He saw Eve Granger rub bits of fine black dust from her jacket and press them between her fingers. When she stared up at him again, her face was white. She pulled him from the entrance of the cave and back into the tunnel. It was quieter here and the wind in the tunnel had subsided.

"Les—the black dust. We've got to get back to Launn. Jordan told me about the dust. It means that the Power is about to strike again."

FAWN, sister to Barbic and Princess of Launn, was worried. Fawn had grown to love Brandon intensely, with the love of a child who grew suddenly to womanhood and dedicated her entire life and love to one man.

Long hours ago she had watched him, clad in the armor of the diver, disappear into the insect world below the city. Since then the others hadn't mentioned his name before her—had tried to make her think that they ignored him and knew that he was in no danger.

Fawn dressed swiftly, covering her fine, long hair with one of her brother's silk turbans. Her small feet were carefully shod in boots and her gown had been discarded in favor of a hardy hunting costume of shirt and breeches. She was ready to search for Brandon.

Fawn knew little of underground Launn. She knew that the insect men meant no harm, and like giant bees, they had worked for Barbic as long as he fed them and kept them locked safely in their hives under the city. Launn owed a great debt to the insect men. From them, Launn took the powder that meant health. Launn had never known ill health until the Power came to steal everything from them.

Fawn found her way under the palace and past the room where she had sought rest and found sleep that lasted for thousands of years. She felt her way to the end of the tunnel and at last stumbled into the room where Phillip Jordon had secretly stayed for so many months, during his visits to Launn.

At the trap door, her courage failed her, and she could go no further. To venture into the hive meant death unless she was protected. She knew that the insect men had no intelligence, that they attacked with one animal thought in mind—to destroy what they could and ignore what they could not harm.

Fawn sat in that room, waiting for, she knew not what. Hoping that Brandon would return.

A storm came from the mountains. She knew that, for the wind found the tunnel and whipped through the room, breaking the door from its hinges and whipping down through the trapdoor into the hive. She sought safety from it behind the empty chest in the corner. She was startled and badly frightened, for no such wind had ever blown in Launn to her knowledge.

SHE STAYED there until the wind was quiet once more. Below, the insect men screamed in protest against the wind that swept through their hive. She went to the trap door

and knelt there, staring down with fascinated eyes at the turbulent scene below.

Then she stiffened. Voices came from the hive. She heard Brandon speak, but he was far away, and she did not understand his words. Then another voice came to her faintly. Her heart sank. It was a woman's voice.

She wanted to leave the trapdoor, but she couldn't tear herself away. Then she saw Brandon coming through the hive in the armor suit, the headpiece tipped back. In his arms, where he could hold her out of reach from the insect men, was Eve Granger, the lovely earth girl.

A great sickness swept over Fawn and she felt faint. With fascinated eyes she watched them come across the hive. Brandon kicked and fought his way through the milling insect men. They reached the bottom of the ladder below Fawn.

The girl in Brandon's arms suddenly kissed him on the lips.

Tears dimmed Fawn's eyes and she sprang away from the trapdoor. She moved swiftly back along the tunnel, groped her way up the stairs and into the palace.

She hurried through the throne room and down the great hall to the square. Barbic was rushing into the palace. Blank, certain fear was written into Barbic's strong face.

"Fawn...?"

She didn't hesitate, but started to run down the steps past him. He turned and tried to catch her as she went by.

"Fawn—don't go out. It isn't safe."

She hardly heard him, but saw his bubble car sitting near the curb where he had just left it. She knew that he was pursuing her—calling for her to come back. She jumped into the car hurriedly and drew back the rocket release. As the car sprang away, she was conscious of a clear, hateful pic-

ture framed too clearly on the steps of the palace.

Barbic was there, staring after with wonder. Beside him stood Brandon, with Eve Granger still in his arms. Barbic was shouting at Fawn, but she could not hear.

The bubble car shot out into the deserted boulevard and she drove swiftly toward the outer city, in the direction of the Mount of Spawn.

She knew that she would drive forever, perhaps straight to death. Death would be welcome now, to heal forever the deep wound in her heart.

"IT WAS Fawn," Barbic said helplessly. "Fawn took my car and drove away. I tried to stop her."

He stared at Brandon as Brandon put Eve down.

"You see the storm? It is like nothing we have ever had. The wind has gone, but look..."

Barbic pointed at the sky.

Brandon nodded.

"I know," he said simply. "Eve was with Jordon. I promised to help her. Jordon knows the secret of the Power. He told Eve. I think we can save the city."

He stared after the disappearing car.

"We've got to act fast," he said, and turned to Eve. "Help Barbic. He'll protect you until I return. I can't promise that you won't see John. You've got to help us, regardless."

She had control over herself again now. Her face was very pale, but resolute.

"I know," she said. "I was a fool to do what I did—down there. I might have known that you're too decent..."

Brandon blushed.

"Forget it," he said. "I've got to find Fawn before it's too late. Help Barbic."

He left them standing there. He ran down the steps two at a time, his eyes already focused on an approaching bubble car. The car moved to the curb and John Granger stepped out. He saw Brandon coming.

"Les," he shouted. "What in the devil...?"

Brandon ran past him and jumped into the car.

"See Barbic," he said quickly. "There is still time. Eve will explain."

He saw John Granger's face turn dead white and watched the older man turn toward the palace.

"Eve?" Granger said questioningly. "Where...?"

Brandon started the car. He waited impatiently as the bubble car gained momentum and the rocket bursts were steady behind it. He had seen Fawn make the turn toward the foothills.

He looked up quickly at the cloud that hung over the city. It was spreading and coming lower. Brandon tried to nurse more speed from the bubble car. He watched the broad, smooth pavement ahead of him, trying to find the tiny speck of Fawn's car in the distance.

JOHN Granger ran up the steps to where Eve and Barbic stood.

"Eve," he cried, and went toward her.

She didn't falter—didn't back away.

"John," she said. "I haven't time to explain now. There are many things to be done. We must save the city. I've learned the secret of the Power."

He stared at her for a moment before he realized the importance of her words.

"You're safe," he said quietly. "I'm very thankful."

He should have seen the tight little lines on her forehead, the misery in her eyes.

"The cloud is growing thicker,"

Barbic said. His voice was oddly calm.

People in the streets were milling about below them. Launn was a frightened city. A city of children who knew not where to turn for safety. They felt the nearness of the Power yet knew not how to fight it. Launn could not fight, for it could not see the monster that was about to devour it.

"You remember Pelee," Eve Granger said coolly.

Her husband's face suddenly mirrored horror.

"Mount Pelee of Martinique?"

She nodded.

"You read about it one night. You read aloud, about the people of St. Pierre and I said that it was impossible. Surely you remember that?"

He nodded, beginning to understand.

"Launn is another St. Pierre," she said. "The lava flows across the mountain, away from the city. The Power comes this way. I believe what you read about ancient Pelee now, John. Jordon told me that the Mount of Spawn is the Power. When the volcanic cloud comes, the Power follows."

John Granger had heard enough. He pivoted toward Barbic. Prince Barbic was badly bewildered. He had listened carefully and learned nothing.

"Your people must go underground at once," Granger said. "If you go deep and close the entrances carefully, sealing any contact with the upper world, you may save Launn."

Barbic did not question him.

"There are the water tunnels, and the hives of the insect men," he said. "Strong doors protect the entrances. The water tunnels are long and very deep."

Granger nodded.

"There's no time to waste. Read a

proclamation at once over the teloscreen. It may be an hour or it may be minutes. The Power is ready to strike."

IT WAS almost dark among the parks of the outer city. Brandon had to slow down, searching the intersecting roads carefully, desperately. He wondered where the girl would go—why she had tried to escape the city.

Surely she had seen the cloud and realized that tragedy would strike? Perspiration stood out on Brandon's forehead. His hands, gripping the steering rudder of the bubble car, were wet and cold.

He crossed a bridge over the last lagoon and sped straight toward the Mount of Spawn.

"Odd," he thought, "driving straight toward death."

He had little chance to escape the Power now, for he was driving straight into the Power's lair. But Fawn was up there somewhere ahead, and regardless of her reason for leaving, he must bring her back or perish in the attempt.

The air was growing hot and the cloud, laying low, covered the park with fine, black pumice. It started to drift across the road, obscuring his vision. He switched on the powerful lights.

Ahead of him, he saw a car overturned in the ditch, wedged against a tall Sparta tree.

He broke the car quickly and left it, running swiftly toward the overturned vehicle. He recognized the crown insignia on the door panel. He reached it, wrenching the door open. Fawn had driven too fast and tried to turn sharply. She was slumped on the seat, her limp body twisted half around toward the door. A dark bruise was visible on her forehead and her lips were parted slightly. He

lifted the unconscious girl to his shoulders and ran as fast as he could in the blackness of the pumice cloud. Reaching his own car he placed her gently in the seat.

Brandon's face was grim as he sped back toward Launn. The city was hidden in the shadow of the cloud.

He reached the first park, and behind him, a strange light lifted into the sky and reflected on the road. It was accompanied by a roaring explosion.

Mount of Spawn was erupting. The Power was on its way.

The cloud swept away swiftly and the sky and reflected on the road. It that burned beneath Spawn. He could not see the Power, for he knew that it came slowly, like a gas, and no man could see it. Launn had died once before, and there had not even been a pumice cloud to warn them. The last time the Power had come alone, before Launn suspected. He was thankful that this time it had given warning.

There was one chance. The first bridge loomed up before him. Praying that the water in the lagoon was deep, Brandon swerved the bubble car and shot straight off the high embankment into the lagoon. The car hit the water with a sickening jolt and darkness closed in once more about him. Brandon took a deep breath and reached for the girl.

IN THE palace, John Granger stood by the huge door, staring up at the fire that belched from Mount of Spawn. He had insisted on taking his chance, so that he might study the Power in action. Launn must learn to fight back, and the city could do so only by knowing what it was fighting.

Barbic was below the city with his people. Most of them had been given ample time to retreat. The huge doors

were closed and bolted. Granger himself had dressed in a heavy fire suit which Launn's men used to fight the flames that occasionally licked at its buildings. The suit was heavy and the helmet thick. Granger felt safe.

He stood by the open doors, watching Spawn. He wondered if Brandon would reach Fawn in time. He could not help them. It had been Brandon's choice and a man must fight his own battle.

The cloud was thickest now, and Granger turned slowly. With a gasp of surprise, he ripped the mask away from his face.

Phillip Jordon stood near him, his face grim with a mocking smile. He held a fire pistol in his right hand.

"Hello, Granger. So we meet again, and at a very opportune moment."

Jordon was dressed in a thin metal suit and he held the glassine helmet in his left hand.

Granger said nothing.

"Well—talk," Jordon said abruptly. "Talk now, because you'll be saying your last words on this planet or any other."

Granger walked toward him a few steps and stopped when Jordon flourished the pistol.

"You're a damned coward, Jordon," he said coldly. "You hide behind a woman's skirts and fight behind my back. Do you think I'm afraid of a man like you, even when you carry a pistol?"

Jordon's face turned a trifle pale.

"Don't try to bluff me, Granger," he warned. "I'll shoot you before you come another two steps."

Granger took another step.

"You thought you could use Eve to betray us. You hated her as much as you do me, but you knew she was weak, Jordon. You and the whole yellow crew behind you."

"I'm warning you, Granger. One more step."

JORDON'S voice was strong now. He was desperate. He had to use the pistol or give way. His fury was growing.

"I knew what you were doing," Granger said. "I'm older than Eve. I didn't blame her for leaving me—but to choose you in my place. She's weaker than I thought."

His arm was upraised now, the heavy helmet poised to crash down on Jordon's head. Suddenly he took the last step. The pistol in Jordon's hand exploded but before it did so, a bundle of fury released itself from the wall curtains and sprang at Jordon's neck.

Jordon went down and Granger's helmet hit him a glancing blow on the face. The fire charge grazed the heavy suit and exploded harmlessly against the wall. Granger went to his knees. Jordon was lying full length on the floor and across his body lay Eve Granger, her cheek bleeding. The helmet had hit her also, knocking her out.

Granger drew her away from Jordon gently.

"Eve?"

His voice was pathetic.

From outside the palace, a gigantic bomb seemed to explode. It rocked the entire city. Granger rushed to the doors. He stared with horror toward Spawn. The sky above Spawn was bright with liquid fire. The black cloud was ripping itself aside and racing toward the city. Behind it, was nothing but empty, sinister sky.

Granger rushed back to the two who lay on the floor. He went to work like a mad man, ripping the suit of armor from Jordon's body. When it was free, he tried desperately to work Eve's limp body into it before it was too late. At last it was done, he placed the helmet over her head. Then and only then did he once more don his own helmet. He sat there on

the floor, her head on his lap, his arms about her, sheltering her as he would a child.

The windows of the room flew open. A strange, hot wind swept through the building. Even through the protecting suit, Granger could feel it. It came and left swiftly, and almost before it reached him, he was once more cool and gasping for breath.

Was it safe now?

HE LIFTED the helmet from his head and took a quick breath. The air was good, but the floor under him, when he touched it with his finger, was very hot. The air smelled hot and sickishly sweet, but he guessed that the Power had passed. He tried one more experiment. He walked slowly to Jordon's body and leaned over it, touching the man's face with his fingertips. He recoiled, backing away from the corpse, his senses stunned, though he knew what he must expect even before he approached the body.

Jordon was stiff and hard. His face, where Granger's fingertips had touched, was like warm rock.

Hurriedly Granger drew the helmet from Eve's face. He hardly had the nerve to touch her. When at last his finger touched her face, her cheek was warm and alive. She opened her eyes and stared up at him.

She was trying to speak and he bent close to her lips, listening, tears glistening his eyes.

"I—was—a—fool," he heard her voice, low, filled with emotion. "I'm no good—Jordon and I..."

He placed a finger gently over her lips.

"I know all about you," he said quietly. "It's all over. Jordon's dead."

She didn't answer, but he knew that each of them would have another chance, and that neither Phillip Jor-

don, nor the entire world could ever tear them apart again.

BRANDON planned swiftly, frantically as the car sank down into the lagoon. The water must be deep, he thought. It had to be deep, or the Power would reach them.

For a few seconds the bubble car remained dry inside. He saw the cool, dark water fighting to get in. He must wait. Must save every precious second and pray that the Power would pass. He slipped over as far as he could toward the right side of the seat. He lifted Fawn to his lap and held her there. He found her handkerchief and tied it tightly over her lips. The girl didn't move. Her eyes were closed.

He was watching the surface of the lagoon.

Suddenly the water above seemed to froth and turn white. It boiled downward and Brandon held his breath. The heat would be terrific. Could it reach the bubble car?

Water was trickling into the rear compartment. He heard it and hoped that the glassine would hold against the pressure.

The bubbles were receding now, back toward the surface.

Suddenly the glassine window broke and tons of water rushed in. With his foot, he kicked the door open. It took all his strength to do it. He held Fawn tightly with his right arm. He pushed himself away from the car and felt the shock of icy water hit his body.

With a powerful kick, he sent them upward toward the surface. He thought he would choke before they reached air.

Quickly he changed his hold, caught Fawn under the arms and swam toward the shore.

It was a strange, peaceful world that he had come back to. The cloud

had gone. There was no fire spewing from Spawn. Launn, far away, was quiet. Too quiet, he thought, as he dragged Fawn's limp body to the shore.

He wondered if Eve Granger's warning had come in time.

IN LAUNN, there was a great celebration. The people, all but a fraction of them saved from the terrible Power, were thankful for their fortunately planned escape. Although they knew little of the Power even now, they would soon learn, for their friends from earth would soon offer an explanation.

At the Palace of Launn, Barbic had prepared for the greatest feast Launn had ever given.

The dining room was filled with workers, and the great table groaned in protest against the load of fruits and meats that covered its fine cloth. The party was small. Tonight was a special celebration, for it marked the day when Princess Fawn would gain a husband and her many admirers would lose their last chance to win her heart.

Barbic sat alone at the head of the table, as his father had sat many centuries ago.

Fawn, looking a little pale, wore her bandage well and it hid the only wound that the Power had left behind. At her side, Brandon beamed like a small boy who had just caught the largest fish. John Granger was as devoted as ever to Eve, and Eve Granger was, undoubtedly, a changed woman. Never again would she find a counterpart for Phillip Jordon. All the Phillip Jordons of the planetary system were forgotten by her, and her eyes were bright and a little misty as she watched her husband rise and face the huge telo-screen that had been placed before him on the table.

He was a fine man and it had taken

her years to realize it. She had been unwise, and a fool. Now that he had forgiven her—had in fact, saved her life in return for his own, she would never leave him again.

Two more pair of eyes watched Granger as he started to speak. Pee-Wee Hudson had done a good job of herding Launn's citizens into the tunnels, and Jenny had not been idle. It had been her request that she be placed in charge of preparing the royal banquet, and the odors that rose from many covered dishes added the crowning touch to her triumph.

Granger touched the button that lighted the screen and sent his message to the waiting people of Launn.

"The Power can never again catch Launn unprepared," he said simply. "I am not a speech-maker. I am a scientist. I cannot take credit for saving Launn." He turned to Eve. "I would like to present my wife, Eve, who went into the enemy camp as a spy and brought back knowledge of the Power. It was her faithful work that gave us time to prepare Launn and to save its people."

Eve Granger found her handkerchief and tried to dry her tears before the others saw. No one seemed to notice. John Granger went on.

"Many centuries ago, in the old world of which we know so little, a Mountain called Pelee erupted and threw tons of lava down upon the town of St. Pierre. A strange thing took place in that town. Thirty thousand people were caught going about their daily work. When rescue ships came, these people were still there, unharmed so far as wounds were concerned. Yet they were all dead, stopped in their tracks where the heat from Pelee had passed."

HE PAUSED, wiping his face with his handkerchief. The room was very quiet.

"The Mount of Spawn is a volcano, but as none of us have gone there, we did not know this. Spawn throws the lava away from the city, into the valleys that we have not explored. However, the wave of super-heated air came in this direction. That was no doubt caused by drafts that we know nothing about. All this must be studied now, and understood, for the sake of future generations.

"Oddly, the heat wave does not burn. It passes too suddenly to burn. Instead, it fills the people's lungs and makes them stop breathing. It kills them quickly, and passes on with so much speed that the victims are stopped in their tracks, without any visible marks on their bodies. Death comes so suddenly that they cannot move from where they stand.

"That is our explanation of the Power, and we have no reason to fear it again, for we know what to do."

He sat down.

Barbic rose and went to the screen. His voice was young, strong and confident as he addressed his people.

"I can add little to what John Granger has told you," he admitted. "However, we owe all to the earth party and I am happy that they have reunited here in my father's home tonight. We will be ready for the Power when it comes again, and we have the help of one who has promised to stay in Launn and make his home here."

He looked across the table at Les Brandon.

"My sister, little minx that she is, made a grave error. An error that would have cost her life had not Brandon saved her from the Power. She has seen her mistake, and I believe that Launn will lose a Princess and some day acquire a Queen. Perhaps Launn will be blessed with a number of members of the Royal family, to keep the house of Barbic

alive."

Fawn blushed and tried to look very small at Brandon's side.

"Earth has sent a message which I will read for the first time," Barbic said, and drew a sheet of script from his pocket.

The party around the table looked surprised. Here was something that none of them knew about.

"The message," Barbic said, "is from the Earth Council of Science. I read:

"A full report of the activities of the Western Research Foundation and the work of Phillip Jordon, has reached this office. When it had been confirmed, the Weston Research Foundation will be relieved of its position and Charles Weston and his aides will be imprisoned. This message will serve as an invitation by this council to John Granger, and will ask Granger to accept the post as leader of a group to be called the Granger Research Foundation and to represent earth in all scientific matters as this council's representative. An immediate response is requested."

NO ONE spoke. John Granger took his wife's hand in his and held it very tightly.

Barbic folded the paper and passed it to Granger.

"Sulphana is a valuable drug," he said. "Launn realized this while Earth was but a lonely outpost of the planetary system. Now, earth wants a supply of Sulphana to pass through the offices of Brandon and Granger. Launn will be well paid for the product and our friends will receive their commissions. That is all I have

to say.

"I could thank my friends, but they do not wish to be thanked. I believe that each one has received his just reward."

He sat down, and the screen went blank.

"Now—if Fawn can concentrate on food," he said with a smile, "we will eat."

Fawn blushed and disentangled her hand from Les Brandon's. Jenny Hudson beamed upon them in a motherly fashion.

"The flour ain't so good here," she said. "But I guess those biscuits will be good enough. The ovens have to be remodeled. They're too hot, too..."

PeeWee Hudson frowned.

"Aw, Jenny, them biscuits are the best, and you know it. Stop making excuses. No one pays any attention..."

"You keep your big blather-mouth shut, PeeWee Hudson," Jenny said testily. "I'm not a good cook and you know it."

Prince Barbic, grinning happily, had already sampled his first one.

"I pronounce the food excellent," he said with a show of authority, "and as I'm the Prince of the city, my word is law. Please stop arguing at once."

For a minute, Jenny Hudson seemed about to sputter in indignation at the upstart who questioned her right to speak. Then she saw the delighted smile they were giving her and subsided with a pleased smile.

"Everything's gonna be all right," PeeWee said softly. "Yes sir, everything's gonna be *all right*."

THE END

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